

# Sermons at Union Congregational Church

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Maundy Thursday

John 13

## Needing Others — Needing Jesus

For the people in the time and culture of Jesus, public meals could become less about food than they were about place. Where you sat reflected your rank in the social pecking order. People would jockey to be seated in a place of importance. So, when Jesus left his place at the table with his disciples, took off his outer garment, and wrapped a towel around his waist, they were confused. And when he began to wash their feet, even more...they became uncomfortable.

Jesus was their Lord and Teacher. If there were no servants present to do foot washing at this important meal, then they should have done this for Jesus. But instead, Jesus was doing this menial act of service and hospitality for them.

And then when Jesus came to Peter, who was a leader among the disciples, he strongly objected: "Lord, do you really think I'm going to allow you to wash my feet? I don't think so! There's no way I can let that happen. It's simply not appropriate."

Peter's unwillingness to admit his need for Jesus' lowly, sacrificial, and menial service reveals that Peter has a problem: an unwillingness to acknowledge his need for grace. And, this attitude is alive and well among us as well.

We don't want to admit that we need help, or saving — which is what grace is!

"I can do it myself."

"I'm fine."

"No thanks."

These can actually be barriers to God's grace!

A week ago, I returned from helping my mom after her knee replacement. She is 84 and lives alone in Wisconsin (my dad died 16 years ago). She is extremely competent when it comes to managing her more than full life: Living in the same house since 1968, and our nearby lake house since 1978; traveling the world still; working out three days a week — tennis once a week — golf in the summer.

To be laid up for a few weeks is — from my perspective — a helpful slowing down for a while. From her perspective it's a necessary nuisance.

And then there was the fact that I was there to TAKE CARE OF HER — and when I left, a network of others who would show up and help out.

I watched her toggle between gratitude that I was there to help with her PT, meals, trips to Walgreen's, laundry, getting the mail, letting people in the house who came for visits... AND a visible discomfort that I was there to help with these very same things!

What my mom disliked during those days is that she was not in control. And we can relate to this; because if you're not in control, you're out of control — and who likes that?

Peter and the disciples are not unique in their struggle to maintain the established order of things and to attempt to reject Jesus' serving them.

But this very human desire to be self-sufficient is actually the opposite of what the Christian life is all about. And Jesus did all he could to refute it and to put value on those who are served by him.

The shocker of this moment was the debasing nature of the action — Jesus was taking on the role of a servant instead of a leader. In first century Palestine, to have one's feet washed by a nameless, faceless servant was normal; it was having those feet washed by one's teacher (or Savior!) that changed the game.

The point was — and is — that love is humble, not just serving, but being served.

To experience this, some churches instead of having communion tonight will actually wash each others' feet. Not us — you are relieved — but what if we did?

Here's how a pastor in Michigan (Kate Kooyman) reflects on participating in a foot washing ceremony.  
*I actually didn't mind washing someone else's feet that much, so it wasn't that hard for me to consider that love looked like serving. The problem for me was having my own feet in the hands of one of my peers. I hated having my carrot toes (and moreover, my imperfect self) being seen and touched. I'm more a wash-my-own-feet kinda gal.*

*This week my friend, who came to the U.S. as a refugee three years ago, shared one of her biggest challenges in trying to adapt to American culture. In this country, people keep to themselves. They're busy, they're private, they're independent, their flaws and struggles are kept hidden. It's nothing like the culture she comes from, which she described as knowing everyone's business and sharing blessings and burdens alike. In this moment, I felt American, through and through. I really don't want anyone to know my business, or bear my burden, or see my flaws, or touch my feet. I want to love and be loved, as long as it happens on my terms and when I have an opening in my google calendar. And as long as I can keep my socks on.*

*But then on Maundy Thursday we're invited to remember the mandate Jesus gives his followers after he surprises them with the foot washing: "A new commandment I give unto you: That you love one another, as I have loved you, that you also love one another."*

I wonder if, for Americans like us, a more honest act of love looks less like searching out someone else's dirty feet to fix, and instead the courage to take off our own socks. To experience the excruciating vulnerability of allowing ourselves to be human in front of another person. To walk around with some dirty feet, and let somebody see them, touch them, wash them, dry them. It sounds awful. And it sounds holy.

This Holy Week, we journey with Jesus through his last days in Jerusalem. Jesus is welcomed by the crowd with hosannas. He teaches and answers questions in the Temple courts. He spends time with his closest followers. He shares the Passover meal. He institutes the Lord's Supper. He prays in the Garden of Gethsemane. His closest friends can't stay awake and pray with him. He is betrayed by Judas. He is denied by Peter. He is abandoned by all but a handful of women. Jesus endures a series of illegal trials, beatings, and mockery. He is crucified and his lifeless body is buried in a new tomb.

And amidst it all, while Jesus knows what is coming — still his thoughts are only for those he loves:  
*Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.*

The Son of God shows himself to be a servant. He does what no master would do; he ties a towel around his waist and washes his disciples' callused, dusty feet. And then he tells them to do the same — to be servants to one another.

It's interesting that the other Gospels — Matthew, Mark, and Luke — speak only of the Last Supper (which became Holy Communion) on this day. But John instead describes this humble act of service, the washing of tired feet. Both are acts of love, enacted by a Lord who, even in the face of death, continues to care for those around him.

And his loving act of humility, sacrifice, and service confronts us, reminding us what is truly important to Jesus — serving each other and welcoming his grace. Which requires not just courage but also humility. It certainly is not an easy path.

But, whether we know it or not — each of us needs his grace. Each of us needs his sacrifice. And like it or not, it is a gift. And not the kind of gift to which we can say, “Oh you shouldn’t have!” and go looking for the gift receipt.

Admitting we’re not really in control, and that we need others in our lives, is how we acknowledge that we need God’s help and provision for us in Jesus.

And then, we recognize that the gift of grace that Jesus has shared with each of us must not be held onto. The grace we receive should absolutely be regifted! As those who follow Jesus, we must serve those whom Jesus loves. Being a follower of the Jesus is NOT only about being served.

Holy Week only becomes holy for us when we welcome Jesus' sacrificial gift of grace with open hands and then turn and share that grace by serving others.

We come to the table of Jesus' mercy with dirty feet to receive his cleansing. We leave with hands full of grace ready to share with others through loving service.

Amen.