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Take off your shoes...and your socks...I want to wash your feet.

If I was more persistent with these requests, you'd probably think your pastor has finally lost his mind. Even though some churches still practice foot washing to remember the night Jesus washed his disciples' feet, many of us might feel awkward, uncomfortable, or an invasion of privacy.

Back when I was in seminary another minister in training decided to have a foot washing ceremony with the youth during Sunday school. He had the basin of water ready, brought a towel, and read the story from John's Gospel that we heard this morning about Jesus washing the disciples' feet. My friend asked the youth to remove their shoes and socks, and some began to fidget and looked embarrassed. Several boys began removing their shoes and socks, but the girls seem less willing to participate. My friend suddenly realized he had not anticipated that many of the girls would be wearing dresses and panty hose, which made the plan of sock removal and foot washing more complicated.

He said to me afterwards, "I hadn't thought through how foot washing would be uncomfortable with teenage boys and girls, so I quickly abandoned the plan and we just talked about how awkward it might have felt to the disciples too."

I think having our feet washed makes us feel vulnerable, an uncomfortable situation that we try to avoid. This week I've encountered many people feeling vulnerable: those who found water in their basements or at the doorsteps of their homes, those who had their electricity and gas shut off due to rising waters, those who were evacuated with only a moment's notice and were brought to [our church's] emergency shelter. I heard stories from those worrying about their pets and those concerned about their cars under water. Others told me their fears about what they would find when they returned home: damaged appliances, furniture, carpet, or building foundations.

One person lamented, "This is the first time this has ever happened to me. I've lived in my house for 30 years and I've never seen the water this high. I was told I didn't need flood insurance since the

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water never floods my area. I don't know what I'm going to find when I return home."

I have also been amazed at the kindness that has emerged: from those who have provided food and personal hygiene items and dry socks to those individuals and churches who called or posted on Facebook asking what we needed. Representatives from Church World Service and Week of Compassion called the very first day, asking how they could assist. Red Cross activated our shelter within a moment's notice, and [our] volunteers who have been through the training showed up ready to help.

I heard over and over again *thank you* from those staying in [our] emergency shelter, who sensed our compassion as we listened to their stories. This week [our congregation] has been in the ministry of foot washing—not literally, of course—but through our acts of kindness and hospitality.

I think what Jesus tried to demonstrate in his act of washing his disciples' feet was that none of us are too good to serve one another, to reach out and

help another person in need. When they questioned why he wanted to wash their feet, Jesus replied,

"Do you understand what I have done to you? You address me as 'Teacher' and 'Master,' and rightly so. That is what I am. So if I, the Master and Teacher, washed your feet, you must now wash each other's feet. I've laid down a pattern for you. What I've done, you do...If you understand what I'm telling you, act like it—and live a blessed life."<sup>1</sup>

I think that's the essence of what it means to be a church. Not the business meetings. Not the financial spreadsheets. Not the numbers of weekly attendance. All those things are important, but the heart of what it means to be a church is how we serve one another—not just our members, but also those in our neighborhood, our community, and beyond.

To serve one another shows those around us that we love them, as was the case with a husband who wanted to figure out how to show his wife how much he loved her.

After dinner he began to recite romantic poetry, telling her he would climb high mountains to be near her, swim wide oceans, cross deserts in the burning heat of day, and even sit at her window and sing love songs to her in the moonlight.

After listening to him go on for some time about this immense love he had, she ended the conversation by asking, “But will you wash the dishes for me?”<sup>2</sup>

Washing dishes or washing feet—both are ways to serve one another and express the love that God has for each one of us. Jesus washed his disciples’ feet to show us what love looks like, and he invited us to do the same. Even though you may not literally wash your neighbor’s feet, you serve others by sending a note to someone not feeling well, visiting someone in the hospital, shoveling an elderly neighbor’s snow, offering food to someone hungry, listening to a friend having a horrible day, offering a ride to work, or helping those in the midst of a flood.

Reaching out to serve those around us may not always feel comfortable—just as uncomfortable as

having our feet washed. Peter resisted the idea of having Jesus wash his feet, but rather than me telling you about that night, I think it’s best to hear from Peter himself.

*My life seems filled with such contradictions, but I’m probably most remembered for the worst events in my life. If you mention my name, Simon Peter, many might think of the three times I denied knowing Jesus. Standing in the courtyard after Jesus had been captured, several people noticed me and asked, “Hey, weren’t you one of the followers of Jesus?”*

*“No,” I replied, “I don’t know him.” I denied knowing Jesus three times that evening. I’m ashamed, but I was terrified. Jesus had just been captured. I had hoped he was the one who would lead us to freedom from the oppression of the Roman government, but when they captured him, I went into shock.*

*Earlier that evening, though, I was ready to immerse myself in following Jesus anywhere. We had gathered for the annual Passover meal, a time we remembered and celebrated how God led our people out of slavery from the Pharaoh through the leadership of Moses.*

*During our meal, Jesus picked up a towel and poured water into a washbasin and indicated he wanted to wash our feet. I know that may sound like*

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*a strange request for you today, but in our day, we walked along dusty roads in sandals—and without socks! We had dirty feet most of the time. A gracious host would have a bowl of water near the door where we could wash our feet, or wealthy hosts also had a servant who would wash the feet of guests. For Jesus to offer to wash our feet seemed demoting, for he was our great teacher, our leader—not our servant.*

*I questioned him by asking, “You’re going to wash my feet?”*

*Jesus replied, “You don’t understand what I’m doing, but this will make sense to you later.”*

*I objected, “No! You’re not going to wash my feet!”*

*Jesus replied in a way I never expected to hear, “If I don’t wash you, you won’t have a place with me.”*

*I then blurted out, “Well then, wash not only my feet but my hands and head as well!” I don’t know*

*what came over me, but I was so eager to follow Jesus that I proclaimed he could wash all of me.*

*Jesus then told all of us, “I have given you an example of how to treat one another. You see me as your teacher, but I have washed your feet as a servant. I hope you will serve one another as well, for servants and masters have equal status in God’s family.”*

*Jesus turned our view of the world upside down—making the last the first, and making the servant equal with the master. He even took my denial of him and offered forgiveness!*

*Jesus may not have met my expectation of overthrowing the Roman government, but he did something much greater: he faced the weakness of humanity and he experienced the pains of our brokenness, and yet, he still told us how much he loved us and how God accepts us. That’s someone I wanted to follow—even if it meant he washed my feet.*

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<sup>1</sup> John 13:12-17 *The Message*

<sup>2</sup> Hodgins, Michael. *1001 More Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, and Compelling Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers* (Kindle Locations 4021-4025). Zondervan. Kindle Edition. #789.