

Blogging toward Thursday: Jesus loves stinky feet

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This week, we're posting three lectionary blog posts: Maundy Thursday's today, Good Friday's tomorrow, and Easter Sunday's on Wednesday. For more commentary on the readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page, which includes current Living by the Word columns as well as past magazine and blog content. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.

When Jesus moves away from the table, strips down, and ties a towel around his waist (John 13:4), I don't think he is thinking about how stinky James's feet always are, or about the bunions that have been growing on Matthew's foot as they made their way to Jerusalem. Rather, he is in the process of inviting the disciples into the most wonderful life imaginable—one in which love, intimacy, and humble service bring both deep delight and freedom from trivialities.

This example, and the agonizing example of the cross, are freely-given gifts. Jesus addresses the disciples as little children. Perhaps the look on his face is that of the excited mother who is showing her beloved, confused daughter how to tie her shoes for the first time. At first, the child will be clumsy and awkward. But eventually she will do this naturally.

And Jesus doesn't mind the smell of feet. One of the things that makes this passage so beautiful is the willingness of the light that shines in the darkness, the Word of God through whom all things were made, to enter into the fullness of bodily existence, stinky feet and all.

John's Gospel offers exalted theology, incarnated in bodily realities. The mystical and visceral come together in the anticipated stench of Lazarus's body (11:39), or when Jesus declares that he grows desperately thirsty on the cross (19:32). This thirst indeed fulfills scripture, but that does not make the parched mouth less painful. The resurrected Jesus does not hide his wounds but invites Thomas to touch them (20:27).

Jesus' foot washing is an act of hospitality, a gesture of welcoming us not just as sinners but as people who can produce body odor. I think of several good, faithful, loving Christians I have known who have stopped going to church because they are embarrassed by bladder incontinence and the need for a diaper or a pad to sit on. This hesitation is understandable but unnecessary. Jesus welcomes us, stinky feet and all.