

Troubling the social order (John 13:1-17, 31b-35)

Jesus seems to encourage a kind of musical chairs, no one staying put for very long.

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A friend and I regularly made pedicure appointments at the same time so that we could catch up with each other while our feet were being scrubbed, buffed, and polished. Sipping hot tea from paper cups while sitting in massage chairs next to each other was a special treat in the middle of winter.

One evening I walked into the nail salon and recognized a pastoral colleague. But she wasn't sitting in one of the comfortable chairs. She was sitting on the manicurist's stool, buffing and polishing a client's fingernails. She explained to me that the salon was owned by her sister, and she was helping out during a busy season.

Instead of sinking into an evening of pampering, I felt unsettled. I tracked where my colleague was all evening, in part to not be overheard as I talked with my friend about my dating life. But also because I was uncomfortable seeing a colleague in the role of manicurist, and then uncomfortable that I was uncomfortable.

I have always been taught that the disciples all squirmed as Jesus washed their feet. But in the texts, only Peter resists Jesus' action. Perhaps we are projecting onto them our own discomfort with Jesus' action. If so, that says at least as much about us as it does about them. Have we grown too accustomed to the comfortable chair?

For my junior year in college I studied in Seville, Spain. I often accompanied Megan, another American student, on her quest to find a Protestant church in Seville. Her church choices were often in poorer neighborhoods on the fringes of the city. Eventually she became a regular at a small charismatic evangelical church. When I attended worship with her, I was always included in her standing lunch invitation to Teresa and David's home.

One weekday afternoon I heard my name from down the hall. I turned to see who called, and it was a woman in a light blue dress, the uniform of a campus cleaner. As I walked down the hall, I recognized her as Teresa. We greeted one another with the customary kiss on each cheek and then chatted for several minutes. After seeing her once, I saw her often. Her warmth and welcome were always a highlight in my day.

Daniel, another student in our program, saw me greeting Teresa and was confused about how we knew each other. He created an entire fiction about our relationship that included drawings of me carrying a mop, bucket, and protest signs demanding higher pay. He just couldn't understand how I not only knew a member of the janitorial staff but was her friend. Teresa the cleaning person and Melissa the upper-middle-class student on junior year abroad did not make sense together.

Jesus seems to encourage a kind of musical chairs, no one staying put for very long. "So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet." Servant becomes served, first becomes last. The social order of the Jesus movement doesn't seem to have much order at all.