

March 29, Maundy Thursday (John 13:1-17, 31b-35)

## **When I was a youth pastor, I was familiar with John 13—but the idea of footwashing freaked me out.**

by [Debra J. Mumford](#) in the [March 14, 2018](#) issue

Growing up in eastern North Carolina as a Missionary Baptist preacher's kid, it seemed like I was always in church. Though we observed many of the important events on the liturgical calendar, there were some we did not. We did not commemorate Pentecost (recognition of the Holy Spirit was a regular part of worship every week). Nor did we formally celebrate the Epiphany (testimony services were our way of acknowledging that Jesus was real and an active part of our daily lives). And we did not observe Maundy Thursday.

The first time I ever heard of Maundy Thursday was when I was a seminary student and a youth pastor at an American Baptist church in Berkeley, California. At the beginning of the year, the pastoral team at the church got together to plan the calendar for the year. When we came to Maundy Thursday, I asked, "What is Maundy Thursday?"

While there was no audible gasp from others on staff, there was a brief silence and an uncomfortable exchange of incredulous glances. I imagine that they might have been thinking, *Where did we get her from again?*

The pastor patiently explained the premise of Maundy Thursday, including the tradition of foot washing. I knew some churches in North Carolina that practiced foot washing, but it was not connected with Maundy Thursday. For the congregation in Berkeley, the tradition was for the senior pastor to wash the feet of the pastoral staff, who then washed the feet of the deacons and any other members who wanted to participate. Just the thought of washing someone else's feet brought to mind close encounters of the smelly kind. The pastor told me to read John 13 to get a better understanding of the tradition. So I read John 13. I had read it before; I had

read the entire Bible several times. But now the passage seemed new.

How surprised the disciples must be to witness their teacher take off his outer garment, wrap a towel around his waist, pour water in a basin, and then kneel to wash their feet. It's not like Jesus has ever demanded adulation from them in the past. But he has certainly never demonstrated servant leadership in such a self-deprecating way. Jesus is their teacher and leader; he has authority over those who chose to follow him. By donning the clothing and persona of a servant, he exhibits a degree of humility that no doubt takes them off guard. If my favorite professor in college or seminary—someone I admired and respected—suddenly removed a professorial blazer, put on an apron, poured water in a pan, knelt down in front of my thong-clad feet, and proceeded to wash them, that would freak me out. Someone whom I respect and who has authority over me should not be kneeling down in front of me.

This is the state in which we find Peter in this text. He is very freaked out. Jesus is serving him, and Peter is mortified at the very thought of it. Through his act of humility and subsequent explanation, Jesus makes it clear that anyone who wants to be his disciple has to be willing to be served even by those whom they revere. And most importantly, they have to be willing to serve one another just as Jesus serves them.

Jesus may also be trying to instill the importance of humility. He wants to make sure that when he is no longer with the disciples, they will not waste valuable time and energy arguing and competing with one another for position (as they do in Luke's account of the Passover supper). Instead, he wants them to focus on carrying on the work he has begun by preaching, baptizing, healing, and challenging the status quo.

On Maundy Thursday that year in Berkeley, the pastor washed the feet of the pastoral staff—including mine. I tried not to be freaked out. Actually, it was OK. By the time the day came, I had read the passage through many times. I had also worked with the pastor long enough to understand his views on the importance of service. He wanted the ministers on his staff to understand that ministry is first and foremost about serving others. So when my turn came, I too washed feet. I was able to do it with an attitude of humility and to focus on service, largely because the pastor provided a model—a model first embodied by Jesus.

While we did not observe Maundy Thursday in my southern, Missionary Baptist tradition, I nevertheless was taught by example, at home and in my faith

community, the whole point of Jesus' servant-leadership demonstration: love. "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples," Jesus tells his disciples, "if you have love for one another." Having love, according to Jesus, doesn't just mean knowing what love is intellectually. Having love means allowing love to make its way from our minds to our hearts and finally to our bodies, so that we act on it for the sake of others. Loving our neighbors means opening our eyes to see them and our hearts to feel their joy and pain. When our neighbors have needs, we must do the best we can, even with limited resources, to fill them. Who knows, they may also do the same for us.