

April 6, Maundy Thursday (*John 13:1-17, 31b-35*)

Would Peter resist having his feet washed by another disciple?

by [Melissa Earley](#) in the [April 2023](#) issue

“Unless I wash you, you have no share with me,” Jesus says to Peter after Peter refuses to let Jesus wash his feet. Jesus insists. Jesus washing Peter’s feet is necessary.

The foot washing is followed by a long farewell discourse in which Jesus gives his disciples a final teaching. It’s the same genre as the farewell discourses of Jacob, Joshua, and David. It’s the most similar to Moses’ farewell discourse in Deuteronomy. But Jesus’ final teaching and prayer for his disciples is preceded by a symbolic act. Of all the things that Jesus could do, he chooses foot washing.

A few months ago, morning foot pain had me hobbling to the bathroom and walking awkwardly down the stairs each morning. Generally it was gone by the time I walked my dog. At 54 years old, I figured it was a sign of aging, the beginning of arthritis in my feet, and there wasn’t much to be done. But I’m going on a ten-day, 100-mile backpacking trip in the Torres del Paine National Park in Chile, and I wanted to be sure there wasn’t something wrong enough with my feet that would cause serious problems on the trip.

So I went to a podiatrist, who prescribed physical therapy. Turns out, I don’t have arthritis. I have tight feet, calves, quads, and hamstrings, along with weak hips. Fixing my feet means improving my balance and flexibility. It means strengthening my core. As the song says, “The foot bone’s connected to the leg bone, the leg bone’s connected to the hip bone, the hip bone’s connected to the backbone.” Everything is interconnected. Fixing my feet means addressing other weak areas.

Addressing foot pain means addressing the rest of the body. A community ethos of washing feet, of serving each other, addresses the rest of the body of Christ. The fundamental teachings of Jesus found in his final discourse and prayer—love one

another and follow Jesus—are intrinsically connected to serving one another within the body of Christ and serving our neighbor who has not yet met Jesus.

Most of the difficulties that churches go through can be traced back to a lack of a servant mindset among the faithful. Complaints that we never sing “the good hymns anymore”; turf wars over space in the building, priority on the calendar, and spending in the budget; even clergy misconduct—these are all signs that we have put ourselves, and not others, at the center of the community’s life.

Would Peter resist having his feet washed by another disciple? His social position does not seem to lend itself to being accustomed to the help of servants. When I have friends over to my home, I show them where they can toss their jackets. I do not have a butler hang their coat in a hall closet reserved for guests. As the disciples enter the home where this meal was served, do they just dip their feet in the basin of water at the door and hold onto each other’s shoulders as they balance to dry each foot, one at a time?

“Wash one another’s feet” is less about showy acts of self-sacrificial service and more about regular acts of hospitality and mutual care. Jesus is inviting his disciples to pay attention to what those around them may need.

Sheryl, a member of my church, is a retired corporate executive and is regularly tapped to chair the “important” committees—trustees, church council. Her name comes up whenever we need a strong leader for a critical campaign or initiative. She is often offered the comfortable chair.

She also makes greeting cards, laboring over each one to construct precisely cut, carefully layered scenes. After laboring over the card, she gathers as many signatures as possible and then makes a personal delivery to the recipient’s door. It isn’t splashy, but it makes a difference to the person who receives it. This simple act of care also shapes Sheryl. She pays attention to who in our church might need a word of encouragement, offers her gifts when needed, and steps aside from leadership when someone else is better suited.

All of our parts are connected to each other. Getting my feet better means strengthening the tiny muscles in my legs and core that help with balance and stretching the muscles in my legs so that they don’t pull so much on my feet. A habit of service conditions our minds and souls to pay attention to the needs of the whole community, rather than serving our particular tastes and appetites.