

Barefoot and vulnerable (John 13:1-17, 31b-35)

Being a part of a community requires allowing others to care for us, even the parts we hope to keep hidden.

by [Elizabeth L. Evans](#)

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The months following my separation and subsequent divorce several years ago felt like an impossible exercise in reinvention. From everyday tasks to emotional feats, I had to relearn how to do many things for myself that I had grown used to relying on someone else for. And at the time, I only knew two people in the town we had moved to together.

Years later, I find myself thriving in work I love, surrounded by a community I cherish. Yet as I face an upcoming surgery, the recovery for which will require physical and emotional support from others, I hesitate to ask for help from my community. I worry about losing the independence I worked so hard to cultivate for myself over the years, but even more so I fear the vulnerability it will take to rely on friends and loved ones.

In this way I relate to Peter's initial refusal to allow Jesus to wash his feet. For one thing, Jesus' actions subvert honor codes of the day, in which servants with low status would be expected to wash the feet of high-status guests. What's more, it takes great vulnerability to allow others to take care of us in such intimate ways.

Perhaps this is why the synoptic gospels win out in earning a sacrament in the church and John's Gospel does not. Any time I've been part of an attempt to recreate the footwashing scene of which I have been a part, one or more participants has elected to have their hands washed instead, uncomfortable with the prospect of having their feet touched or even gazed upon.

Being a part of a community, however, requires the vulnerability of allowing others to care for us, even the parts we hope to keep hidden. When Jesus reminds Peter of this—withholding a place in Jesus' life if he does not allow Jesus to wash his feet—Peter misses the mark yet again. He tells Jesus to wash his hands and head in addition to his feet, misunderstanding that the power of footwashing is not in the water's cleansing properties but in Jesus' invitation into intimate relationship.

There is a cost to discipleship, a reality we come face to face with on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday every year, but we are never asked to bear this cost on our own. Humans are inherently relational creatures, and following Jesus is an inherently relational act. Following Jesus requires all of us, including the willingness to let him—and our community—see and care for the parts of ourselves we do not want seen.

It is only in our vulnerability that we can fully accept Jesus' invitation into meaningful relationship.