

ALL YOU NEED
FOR WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
GREENVILLE, SOUTH CAROLINA
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Our text today comes from John chapter 13, verses 1-5 and 12-17. Listen for the word of God.

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.²The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper³Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God,⁴got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself.⁵Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.

¹² After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, 'Do you know what I have done to you?¹³You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am.¹⁴So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.¹⁵For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.¹⁶Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them.¹⁷If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

In 1968 François Clemmons, a gay black man from Birmingham, Alabama, found himself singing in a church choir in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. François was a huge personality with a huge voice, so perhaps it is unsurprising that he caught the ear one Sunday of a young Presbyterian pastor with a nationally syndicated television show. Fred Rogers asked François immediately to join his televised neighborhood as *Make-Believe*'s friendly police officer.

It's significant enough that Clemmons was *the first* African American regular character on a television show. Add to that the setting: 1968. Only months before Clemmons became *Make-Believe*'s police chief, Dr. King was assassinated. Not long before that, while marching from Selma to Montgomery, white and black protesters had been beaten, gassed, and abused by Alabama troopers. Bombs erupted in the streets of Clemmons's hometown. Black Americans felt little support from white clergy or white law enforcement.

Clemmons was haunted by the images coming out of his state, and he felt a strong measure of resistance when the sweater-clad upper class Pennsylvanian came knocking. But Fred Rogers, fueled by his faith and a sense of common decency, had a vision. François Clemmons would bring compassionate order and a new face to neighborhoods across the United States.

Throughout the Gospel of John Jesus performs “signs” — what we may commonly call miracles — that point to a greater truth about his person and work. The author of John, beginning all the way back at the wedding of Cana reminds us time and again that despite those “signs,” Jesus’ powerful contradiction of supposed possibility, his “hour had not yet come.”

We hear it over and again: “his hour had not yet come.” *Not yet*, the author of the text says. *You may think this is the moment*, feeding the five-thousand, walking on water, *but something bigger is brewing*. We hear it and hear it and hear it and then, in chapter thirteen, while surrounded by his friends, we finally get to the climax: “Jesus knew that his hour had come.”

Jesus knew. Twice in chapter thirteen the author of John assures us of Jesus’ profound awareness. Surrounded by those he loves, he knows that he will be betrayed, he knows who he is (“from God” // “going to God”), he knows that he is on the edge of life, and he knows that all of the power and authority of heaven and earth is in his hands.

The hour has arrived and Jesus knows it. Everything in John’s gospel has been pointing to this moment. The one who works wonders, the teacher, the Lord, this God will enact his greatest sign.

And what will that sign be?

Imagine you don’t know what happens next, that all you know is that a god in human likeness is now confronted with the possibility of desertion, torture, and crucifixion.

In the movie this is where the protagonist, backed into a corner, surveys the room before before depositing his enemies. The hero fights. And he wins. That’s the narrative expectation.

The hour has come for our hero. What will he do?

Well, a man’s gotta eat. On the night he was betrayed Jesus shares a meal with his friends. A good meal. Lamb and wine and the comfort that comes from deep familiarity. The God of creation at table with those whom he loves.

It’s startling enough if you’re paying attention but the meal’s not all, and this is where our expectations are absolutely upended. Knowing his hour has come, knowing he will die the infinite God finite in frail flesh rises from the low-set table, takes off his outer robe, puts a towel around his waist, kneels, and begins to wash the feet of his disciples.

Certainly a foot washing was a common enough thing in those days. Travel had its sanitary challenges in dusty Palestine. But washing another man's feet was a job for a servant, not a teacher. A slave, not a Lord.

Jesus Christ took up the towel of a servant in order to do the work of a servant. Discarding his robes of privilege, he poured water over Peter's feet, over John's feet. He poured water over Judas's feet and rubbed them until the vat below turned black with the grime of life outside that room.

It is painfully intimate, almost embarrassing. The Lord our Servant, the God of creation concerning himself with the cleanliness of our feet. It doesn't make a lick of sense y'all.

There was always a ritual on the Sunday mornings we spent in Due West. The never-ending morning at the ARP church: Sunday School, a thorough reflection on the word, a good dose of the Psalter, and then 45 minutes on the front steps greeting every resident of the town. After that there was supper. The big Southern feast that we all kept our church clothes on for. And then, as the afternoon lingered into evening, there was the farm. While my parents packed up our stuff I went out with my grandfather to survey the land.

I'm sure we were there to do something. Probably feed cows. No one told me, or I didn't listen. I jumped out of the truck with utter disregard for anything but my freedom. If there was something to step in, I stepped in it. And trust me, there were many things, approximately commensurate with the number of cows, to step in. I fell in the dust and dirt and by the end of the hour-or-so sojourn I was profoundly filthy. I loved it.

It happened every time. The car was packed ready for departure until I came rolling out of the back of my grandpa's pickup like Pig-Pen in the Christmas play.

What's a mother to do? I couldn't go in the house. I couldn't get in the car. I was covered in grime and needed a wash. Well, even in Due West there was a hose. I was positioned on a tarp in the middle of the yard while my mother, from a safe distance with the nozzle on high, tried to spray me down.

But that never did entirely work. There was just too much grit. Eventually she had to get the towel. Right there in the middle of the front lawn on a plastic tarp.

Now don't get me wrong: that was an act of self-perseverance. She and my father had to sit in a car with me for two hours and one can only take so much. But in their Sunday clothes, ready to be anywhere but there, it was also an act of service. She did for me what I wouldn't do for myself.

We've been asking ourselves in this sermon series who Jesus is. An exorcist, our Lord, the vine, the teacher, the way.

Today we are confronted with the paradox. To meet God is to meet a man on the edge of death. A man who, rather than seeking vengeance from those who pursue him or exercising sheer power over them, chooses to spend his final hours at supper. A man who washes the feet of his friends. Who serves them. Who does for them what they cannot do for themselves.

This is the sacrificial lamb and the steady shepherd, the prince and the slave, the savior, the king, the creator who from before time loved this world into being. The man whose death secures our life, who lays aside prerogatives of power to reconcile a broken world. That is who Jesus is. That is the power of God.

Who is Jesus Christ today? We crane our necks looking for God in our world. We look up, as if salvation can only come from the sky. Perhaps, though, salvation is at our feet.

François Clemmons didn't want to play an officer on a children's television show in 1968. But who could say no to Fred Rogers? In 1969, at the tail end of one of the most tumultuous decades in American life, on a nationally syndicated show, Mister Rogers, a buttoned up white pastor, sat in his front yard. A million kids all around America sat with him. And when Officer Clemmons strolled by, Mister Rogers invited him to rest for a moment too. To share a lemonade, to cool his feet in a little kiddie pool.

The camera lingered on Mr. Rogers's feet next to Officer Clemmons's. A white churchman and a black officer sharing a space of intimacy. It was an act of resistance, a refusal to accept things as they were. It was a fight, a rupture in apathy, a vision of hope, a gospel proclaimed, a sermon preached, and a command fulfilled.

And it was nothing less than sacramental. "The icon Fred Rogers," remembered Clemmons after Rogers's death, "not only was showing my brown skin in the tub with his white skin as two friends, but as I was getting out of that tub he was helping me dry my feet."

"He was helping me dry my feet."

No power but the counter-intuitive Gospel of love could compel that. The service, the resistance and transformation is precisely divine. God in a cardigan. God in an officer's cap.

This text is usually ready on Maundy Thursday, the day the church sets aside to remember the “Mandate” which Christ offered his disciples on the eve of his death: “if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. ¹⁵For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.” Let me tell y’all, this is not a once-a-year text.

This is who Jesus Christ is yesterday, today, and forever. This is Jesus’ moment, this is how God chooses to fight. With a world set against him Jesus lives radical love. He washes the disciples’ feet. And then he dries them.

But this isn’t just about Jesus. It’s about us. It’s about who we are and who we are called to be. “Love one another,” Jesus commands, “*JUST* as I have loved you.”

This is our fight too. It’s not a saloon-swinging shoot-’em-up, it’s not a revenge fantasy, it’s not a thunderbolt of power. It is an absolute refusal to accept things as they are, a rejection of any Kingdom that builds power by exploitation, a rejection of the notion that we can use others as tools along the way, a rejection of moral relativism. The radical power of God is the power of a people who see chaos and follow a better way. It is the power of a people armed with a bucket of water and a dirty old towel.

What does it mean to be a Christian in our world? Imagine all of the power in this room, all of the privilege we embody. Not wealth, not stuff — simply the power of our being and the ways we are allowed to move in the world. All of it is utterly meaningless if we do not strip ourselves of it, wield it, as it were, in acts of radical, inclusive, uncomfortable service by which we will make ourselves known as followers of Christ and his greater way.

Salvation is at our feet. And we are being called to follow.

In 2006 evolutionary biologist and outspoken atheist Richard Dawkins gave an interview on science and faith in *Time*: “I don’t see the Olympian gods or Jesus coming down and dying on the Cross as worthy of the grandeur [of the supernatural] [...] If there is a God, it’s going to be a whole lot bigger and a whole lot more incomprehensible than anything that any theologian of any religion has ever proposed.”

We crane our necks looking for God in our world. Perhaps what is so shocking in John thirteen is just how approachable, just how comprehensible God is. The God who washes our feet is far more a challenge to our deeply ingrained systems, our mindless apathy, our benign neglect than some abstract god far removed sheer power.

God is a whole lot bigger than we can ever imagine, but God has chosen to make God’s self known by washing our feet. That’s the fight. A fight against who the world has told us to be,

against the competition and stereotypes we are meant to uphold, a fight against the divisions we are asked to protect.

We crane our necks looking for God in our world. But God has chosen to reveal himself in vulnerability, in acts of service. As familiar as a paper-cut. A pang of recognition. A towel to wash us down, a pool to cool our feet. It's a scandal to Dawkins and a challenge to us.

Love them as I have loved you. That's the command, the mandate, the final words before they go on their way. It's all we need and all we need to know. Love lived in a bowl of water with which we wash one another's feet. In the Neighborhood shocking our ambivalence and proclaiming God's justice, in the front yard with tender care, in places we have not yet begun to imagine, in places we surely don't want to go.

Stop looking up. Look around. Where is God? At our feet. Calling us on. Fighting for us and asking us to fight for the world. With a servant's towel and a heart of love. Thanks be to God.

—Leigh Stuckey