

Oh Happy Day...

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By Rev Paul Graham

Read John 13:1-17



As we emerge slowly, blinking nervously into the light of what we might want to tentatively call a post-pandemic world, we can take time to ask ourselves what lessons we've learned from the experience of the last 15 months. Apart from ensuring that we maintain a bat-free diet (allegedly), we will probably want to say something about proximity to people. Whether we are more nervous in crowded spaces, or miss the easy intimacy of contact with fellow human beings, or are desperate to hug our family members, it's all about the people around us.

We also might want to say that our hand hygiene has improved, though repeated applications of hand sanitizer can play havoc with the skin, and we are probably more mindful of how others behave, particularly if you are going to use the same door handle or rail after them. But at least we don't have to deal with each other's feet on a regular basis (unless your employment insists on this).

For some, feet are the ultimate no-no of the human body. I must be honest, I'm not a fan either. Ugly, veiny, with jagged toenails creating an ensemble more suited to the more scaly denizens of the reptilian world, feet are not the first thought when considering the human form as a thing of beauty. And that's before we get to the smell.

Of course, there is a long tradition among some Christians of pairing the sock and sandal in a travesty of fashion (in my opinion), but at least they have the common decency to keep their feet encased in fabric, away from the public gaze. And, as much as I am a fan of the flip-flop and the Croc (alternative plastic slip-on footwear is available), I must say that the less I see of the human flipper the better.

So, it might be said that Jesus' act of foot-washing wasn't just one of service, but of sensory sacrifice. To get up close and personal with feet that had walked through who knows what to get to the Upper Room, to peel away the leather thongs of the sandals, and to gently wash away the detritus of the day without so much as a peg on the nose is no mean feat (excuse the bad pun).

This was the job of the lowliest of the serving staff or left up to the individual to tackle on their own. It certainly was not the role of the host of the party to do the soap-and-towel work. But, as host, Jesus wanted to subvert this and give an example for the disciples to follow.

As a radical action, it was about as demonstrative as Jesus could have got. Instead of the honoured host, venerated by those who were graciously permitted to join his illustrious company, Jesus got his hands very dirty indeed. As a counterpoint to the disciples' arguments about which one of them would be the greatest, it couldn't have been more stark^[1].

The conversation between Peter and Jesus is an interesting one, particularly if you know what came later. Looking back, I wonder whether Peter considered the implications of Jesus' insistence just to wash his feet, even though the rest of him was about to become very murky as he abandoned his best friend. Predicting Peter's denial was one thing, Jesus wasn't able to forgive in advance as well.

But what do we take away from this momentous and odiferous reframing of leadership and servanthood in light of our journey through 2 Chronicles 7:14? Certainly the injunction to be more humble finds its embodiment in Jesus' actions. We do well to learn from Jesus when considering what it means to live in relationship with others, particularly where there is a degree of hierarchy (either perceived or actual) involved in the dynamics.

Not forgetting, of course, that it takes two to tango: humility needs to be both offered and received. It does no-one any favours if their attempts to be humble are rebutted like Peter. For everyone trying to be like Jesus, there needs to be people willing to receive like the other eleven disciples, which brings me neatly to the next point.

Among those eleven, or twelve if we allow Peter back into the fold, was Judas. Along with Peter, Judas was to play a major part in what followed once the dinner party had finished. Unlike Peter, however, Judas didn't live to see Easter Sunday.

And here's the moment when John and the Chronicler meet: 2 Chronicles 7:14 gives God's promise that if his people turn from their wicked ways (along with prayer, seeking God and humility), forgiveness and healing would follow. You could say that the result of Jesus' own act of humility ended in a one-all draw. One returned to the fold after their sin: denying any knowledge of your best friend, even under the threat of death, being a sin in most people's books, albeit one that you might want to argue about mitigating circumstances. One definitely didn't return: Judas's demise is variously reported by the Gospel writers (Luke saves his own gruesome account for the first chapter of Acts), but no acknowledgement is given to Judas seeking forgiveness, as much as Andrew Lloyd-Webber and Tim Rice might want us to believe in *Jesus Christ Superstar*.

To emphasise this point, John even goes so far as to explain (is this an early example of "mansplaining"?), the meaning behind Jesus' words to Peter when debating how much of the body requires washing. John wants us to understand that Jesus is fully aware of Judas's intentions (John 13:10-11); whether Judas was party to this conversation or not is unclear. Whether he heard and ignored the hint, or didn't hear, or just

thought that Jesus was talking about someone else in the self-righteous way that we all do is left to the imagination of the reader, or at least it is this side of eternity.

What is less clear is that Jesus is also talking about everyone. Washing feet as an act of confession, forgiveness and absolution was offered to, and accepted by, all those who were there. That's the extent of God's forgiveness and grace. I just wonder if Judas realised it. I also wonder if the other 10 disciples realised that they also needed to accept God's forgiveness for themselves.

One of the issues with the Easter season is that we rightly focus on the Big Stories of the time: the death of the Saviour, the betrayal, the denial, the women who didn't abandon Jesus, the men who did, the empty tomb, and so on. What sometimes gets missed is the smaller detail, such as the use of light and dark in John (have a look, it's a fascinating study on the theology of shade), or indeed how Jesus washed all the disciples' feet, Judas included.

Each and every one of those disciples had something to be forgiven for, some "wicked way" that they needed to turn from. Granted, they aren't the headline sins of denial and betrayal, but there's no hierarchy of sin in God's eyes. All needed to turn, all were offered the chance to find grace in a bowl of water. The other gospel writers include the breaking of bread and sharing of wine for the same reason and purpose; Judas was also present at this moment in the Last Supper.

So, in effect, the result of Jesus' act of humility wasn't a one-all draw; it was a resounding 11-1 thumping, a scoreline that most football fans would delight in (unless they were on the losing side). It's just that we sometimes lose sight of the Whole Picture when we focus on the Big Story.

2 Chronicles 7:14 is for everyone, in the same way that Jesus washed everyone's feet. We might think that it only matters to the big hitters who, like Peter and Judas, hog the limelight, but actually it's for you, for me, and everyone in between. We all need to turn from whatever "wicked way" that we subscribe to, but the good news is that Jesus is waiting for us with the bowl and towel. He is willing to get his hands dirty for us, are we willing to place our feet into the living water to be cleaned?

Amen.

[1] Luke 22:24-30 records this towards the end of the meal, though he has no corresponding account of foot washing. John doesn't include the argument in his account, possibly because Jesus' earlier actions would have showed how foolish the disciples were in having the debate!

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