



*Diocese of the*  
**MID-ATLANTIC**  
Anglican Church in North America

April 13, 2017

Dear Friends,

At his Last Supper with his disciples, Jesus washed his disciples' feet. Footwashing was viewed as a humiliating, degrading task, done by the lowest ranking servant. And so his action was completely unexpected, even perplexing to his disciples.

There are two levels of meaning in what Jesus did.

First, we see it as a moral example of humility to be imitated by the church. Jesus said, "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you" (John 13:14-15).

In Luke's Gospel, the account of the Last Supper includes an additional incident and words from Jesus. "A dispute also arose among them, as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest. And he said to them, 'The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves'" (Luke 22:24-27).

It may be that it was this grasping for position and prestige among the disciples that led Jesus to take the basin and towel and stoop to wash their feet. And then one can readily picture Jesus resuming his place at the table and saying those words, "But I am among you as the one who serves."

It is humbling to wash another person's feet. But for many of us in our culture, it is actually more humbling to allow our feet to be washed. Either way, Jesus commends his example to us and says that we should do as he has done.

The second meaning of Jesus' action is seen earlier in the account in John 13. Jesus, we are told in verse 4, "rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments." And then in verse 12, "When he

had washed their feet, put on his outer garments....” The words used here in the original Greek for “laid aside” and “put on” are exactly the same words Jesus himself used earlier in his teaching about being the Good Shepherd and offering his life for the sheep. Only there in Chapter 10, the words are translated “lay down” and “take up.” Jesus said, “I lay down my life that I may take it up again,” referring to his death and his resurrection (John 10:17).

Jesus’ washing of his disciples’ feet is a symbol of his dying on the Cross for them. This much deeper significance of his action is made clear in verse 7, where Jesus says, “What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand.” Only after Jesus’ death and rising from the grave will they understand the greater meaning.

Jesus’ washing their feet is a symbol of his humbly laying down his life for them, an acting out beforehand of the humiliation of the Cross—just as Mary had poured perfume on him and had acted out beforehand the anointing of his body for burial.

But Peter protests, “Lord, do you wash my feet? ...You shall never wash my feet” (13:7-8).

In response, Jesus makes clear there’s something profoundly important at stake here. He says, “Unless I wash you, you have no part with me.”

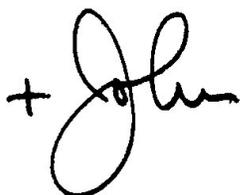
Why? Because the footwashing done by Jesus is a symbol of his death for our salvation. Therefore, Peter must submit to it. It is only through Jesus’ death that there is salvation. We must be humble enough to accept what Jesus did for us. We have to be broken over our own sinfulness, humiliated by our failures and desperate for forgiveness. We must submit to Jesus, who is our only hope for redemption and new life.

So it’s clear that Peter is still missing the point when he says, “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head.” But more washings are not better. Jesus’ Cross is sufficient. His death on Calvary is the perfect sacrifice. No other religious actions are needed.

Then, once we are washed by Jesus’ blood in salvation, we can live out his example of humility by serving one another. Our footwashing is dependent upon Jesus’ washing of us. Only when we have humbly come to him, receiving his free gift of forgiveness, can we turn to others in Christ-like service. “We love,” the First Letter of John says, “because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

As many of us participate in this act of humility by the washing of one another’s feet in our Maundy Thursday worship, let us do so in the certain knowledge that we have been washed in the precious blood of Jesus Christ shed on the Cross for our salvation.

Faithfully yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ John". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a small cross-like mark at the beginning.

The Rt. Rev. John A. M. Guernsey