

**Hebrews 10:19-25**

**John 13:1-20, 31-35**

**January 18, 2015**

*Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC*

**Focus on the Big Message**  
**SACRAMENTAL SERVICE**

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

On that holy Thursday night, the beloved and respected religious leader knelt down and washed the feet of twelve people. With that simple act of humble service, the man scandalized many people. He broke the rules when he picked up a towel, knelt down, and lovingly washed the feet.

Then he did it again a year later!

You thought I was talking about Jesus and his disciples. But the beloved and respected religious leader was Pope Francis. The holy Thursday night was April 17 of last year, Maundy Thursday. The twelve people whose feet he washed included a 16-year-old boy from Cape Verde, a group of islands off the west coast of Africa, who was paralyzed in a diving accident in 2013; a 19-year-old man and a 39-year-old woman with cerebral palsy; and two 86-year-olds with mobility problems. They are all residents of the Fondazione Don Carlo Gnocchi, which operates centers for rehabilitation and therapy.

On Maundy Thursday 2013, Pope Francis washed the feet of twelve people at a juvenile detention center in Rome, including two women and two Muslims. Before he became Pope, when he was the archbishop of Buenos Aires, Francis washed the feet of young mothers at a maternity ward, washed and kissed the feet of AIDS victims at a hospice center, and washed the feet of recovering drug addicts at a rehab center.

But when Francis washed the feet of “ordinary” people as Pope, he broke the rules — “the way things had always been done.” Until then, modern popes had only been “allowed” to wash the feet of twelve priests. Needless to say, there were many in the church hierarchy who were not pleased with this pope’s action. However, as one news report put it, “By eschewing traditional practice, Pope Francis is emphasizing the *spirit* rather than the letter of the law — something Jesus himself did by breaking with Jewish tradition in washing his disciples’ feet. And the spirit, or meaning, behind washing the feet of another person is one of humility and service — that through the act, the leader becomes a servant to his followers.”<sup>1</sup>

For twenty years, he served as a Church of Scotland missionary in the African countries of Ghana and Malawi (1954 - 1974). He was committed to acting out and living out the principles of the Iona Community, including being involved in Christian service committees and refugee resettlement and community development projects. He helped refugees from Mozambique who were seeking asylum in Malawi.

During the 1960's and 1970's, as many African nations became independent, there was a movement among missionaries to encourage the writing of Christian songs that used African ideas, themes, tunes, and rhythms. Rev. Tom Colvin was very involved in this hymn writing campaign by adapting many local African melodies and writing words that were appropriate to the faith of African Christians.

Rev. Colvin's most popular song is our second hymn this morning, "Jesu, Jesu, Fill Us With Your Love." The lilting and rhythmic hymn tune is called CHEREPONI, after a town in northern Ghana. Remember the chorus? "Jesu, Jesu, fill us with your love; show us how to serve the neighbors we have from you." The first verse tells today's gospel story: "Kneels at the feet of his friends, silently washes their feet, Master who acts as a slave to them." A history of the hymn notes that "the general theme of service makes the hymn appropriate for any time of the year . . . The dominant theme is the equality of all peoples in Christ . . . The composition of the hymn itself is symbolic of collaboration between two cultures. The text comes from a European Christian inspired by his service in Ghana. The melody comes from a West African country. In this composition, even the act of hymn singing may become a metaphor for neighborly relationships that are possible in Christ."<sup>2</sup>

Wednesday night at handbell practice we played "They'll Know We Are Christians By Our Love." That song has been in the handbell choir's playlist for a long time, maybe even since the choir was formed. I remember the Attie Carlton Handbell Choir playing it on Palm Sunday, April 5, 1998, which was my first Sunday in the pulpit here at the Wallace Presbyterian Church. Perhaps some of you used to sing the song around the fire at Camp Kirkwood or another camp on a retreat, or at a Youth Fellowship meeting when you were in high school, or in a college Christian Fellowship gathering.

One of the many helpful features of our new hymnal, *Glory to God*, is the interesting notes at the bottom of the hymn pages. Below Hymn #300 you read, "A parish priest at St. Brendan's on the South Side of Chicago in the 1960s was very involved in the local Civil Rights movement and needed something for his youth choir to sing at ecumenical, interracial events. Finding nothing, he wrote this song in a single day."

That parish priest was Father Peter Scholtes. St. Brendan's Church was half Irish, half African-American. When Martin Luther King, Jr. traveled to Chicago, Father Scholtes and his associate priest hung out a welcome banner. That didn't go over very well with about half of the congregation. When Dr. King came to the church, Father Scholtes offered him a cup of coffee and invited him to the church basement, where the women of the church fed Dr. King and the people who were with him.<sup>3</sup>

Our closing hymn today says, "We are one in the Spirit; we are one in the Lord; and we pray that unity may one day be restored: And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love; yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love." The refrain is taken from Jesus' words to his disciples after he washed their feet: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:35) With his invitation to Dr. King to the basement reception, and throughout his ministry,

Father Scholtes lived out both Jesus' words to his disciples and the words he himself wrote for this beloved hymn.

A silver bowl of water sitting in a marble baptismal font — water “common to the location” (*Book of Order*, W-3.3605), which in our baptismal services means from the faucet in the kitchen. The Lord commanded, “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” (Matthew 28:19)

A piece of bread, cut and sitting on a plate or torn from a common loaf . . . “bread common to the culture of the community” (*Book of Order*, W-3.3610), which in our communion services means wherever Harriet buys the bread, maybe Food Lion or Piggly Wiggly. A sip of juice, poured into a small, individual cup or dipped out of a common cup with the torn piece of bread. The Lord commanded, “Do this in remembrance of me.” (Luke 22:19)

These are the two sacraments of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) — baptism and the Lord's Supper. According to the Westminster Larger Catechism, “a sacrament is an holy ordinance instituted by Christ in his church, to signify, seal and exhibit unto those that are within the covenant of grace, the benefits of his mediation; to strengthen and increase their faith and all other graces; to oblige them to obedience; to testify and cherish their love and communion one with another, and to distinguish them from those that are without.” (Q/A #162) A sacrament is often described as “an outward sign of an invisible grace.”

A basin of water, a towel, and the Lord's command, “So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.” (John 13:14) Have you ever wondered why foot washing is not a sacrament?

The best comment I have heard is that “Jesus' act of washing the disciples' feet has been called ‘the sacrament that almost made it.’” One writer has said (tongue in cheek, but with a lot of truth?), “It's probably just as well that foot washing never became a sacrament. Church property committees would not take kindly to pans of dirty water on the new carpet in the chancel. If theologians had gone to work on the question, we would still be embroiled in endless debate as to whether the feet should be immersed or sprinkled. Liturgists would argue whether the right foot or the left foot should be immersed first. Others would speculate on the symbolism of baptizing heads or feet. It's always easier to follow Jesus in our heads than it is to follow him with our feet on the Way of Sorrows [*sic*].”<sup>4</sup>

Maybe “washing feet” doesn't necessarily have to mean “washing feet.” In Jesus' day, that was a necessary task when people walked in sandals or barefoot on dusty roads. Even so, Jewish law forbid any Jews except those in slavery from washing another person's feet. But we don't really need to wash tired, dusty feet when people come to church or visit in our homes. So, maybe “washing feet” can mean service, sacramental service — Do unto others, serving one another, being known as disciples of Jesus Christ by our love for one another.

As I mentioned last Sunday, the session has made a commitment to “focus on the big message” this year. The “big message” is “Love God, love neighbor.” That commitment on the part of the session translates into helping all of us focus on relationships with God and each other so that our souls will be fed. For the next few Sundays, my sermons will be based on texts (Old and New Testament) that, I hope, will help us “focus on the big message.”

The idea of “washing feet” as sacramental service can certainly help us “focus on the big message.” When Jesus washed his disciples’ feet just before died, he was getting them ready for service in his name. But there’s also another part to the story — that is, Peter’s refusal at first to let Jesus wash his feet — “You will never wash my feet.” (John 13:8) Listen again to what Jesus said to Peter, “If I don’t wash you, you can’t be part of what I’m doing.” (*The Message*)

We may have a hard time imagining ourselves down on our knees, bathing someone’s tired, bony, calloused, maybe smelly feet. But Jesus’ command/example to “wash one another’s feet” calls us to humble ourselves and to be willing to do even the most menial of tasks.

We may also have a hard time letting someone else “wash our feet.” Peter was indignant when Jesus got around to him. “Master, **you** wash **my** feet?” (*The Message*) Such a sentiment can sound awfully noble when it comes out of our mouth, but it might really be prideful. “No, no, no. I’m not used to being on the receiving end. That hits too close to home. I need to be the powerful/giving one.”

When Pope Francis washed the feet of the women and the Muslims and the paralyzed teenager and the people with cerebral palsy and the elderly people who had a hard time getting around, some in the church hierarchy were not happy that he didn’t have more respect for the way things are supposed to be done.

But there Jesus is — kneeling down with a towel wrapped around him.

There he is — our Teacher and Lord, washing feet.

There he is — breaking the rules, showing us that meeting human need is always more important than our rituals.

Maybe we really will wash someone’s feet — maybe not.

However we serve others, let us offer our sacramental service in the spirit of foot washing.

And let us hope and pray that all will know that we are Jesus’ disciples because we have love for one another.

Let us hope and pray that they’ll know we are Christians by our love.

***Let us pray: Holy God, you put all power and authority into the hands of Christ — Christ, who washes our feet in humble service. Teach us to love one another as Christ has loved us, so that everyone will know that we are his disciples; through Jesus Christ our Teacher and Lord, we pray. Amen.***

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The information about Pope Francis washing the feet of “ordinary people” is taken from an on-line article from CNN by Delia Gallagher, dated Thursday, April 17, 2014: “Pope Francis washes the feet of disabled people as part of Easter celebration” at [www.cnn.com](http://www.cnn.com).

<sup>2</sup>C. Michael Hawn, “History of Hymns: ‘Jesu, Jesu, fill us with your love,’” Discipleship Ministries of The United Methodist Church at [www.gbod.org](http://www.gbod.org).

<sup>3</sup>Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, “1 John 5:1-6, Pastoral Perspective,” in *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 2*, eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), pp. 490, 492.

<sup>4</sup>Robert H. Herhold, “Foot Washing and Last Things (John 13:1-20),” at [www.religion-online.org](http://www.religion-online.org).