

CHRIST ENCOUNTERS: HUMBLE

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John 13:1-17

The last thing I do before I go to a dentist appointment is brush my teeth. Even if I am scheduled to have my teeth cleaned I will still brush them beforehand. I want my mouth to be clean for the hygienist. It just seems polite. I doubt they would be very happy if I walked in chewing on peanut butter crackers and reeking of garlic.

In the same way, I imagine that when a church engages in the ritual of foot washing that every foot in that church has already been freshly scrubbed. The worst thing that you would want to do is to show up at a foot washing with dirty feet. As for me, I would use an extra-soapy washcloth to scour my feet and then floss between my toes. I'd check that my nails were clean and cut short. I imagine the ladies would apply a fresh coat of polish. After all, it seems impolite to arrive with grubby feet.

But this would not have been the case in Jesus' day. Foot washing was not a religious ritual. Rather, it was a sign of hospitality. If you invited someone into your home, you would offer to have a servant wash their feet. And rarely would anyone show up with clean footies.

Remember, in that day, most people wore sandals. To get anywhere they would have to walk. Roads weren't generally paved. They were just dirt. If the weather was dry, the roads would be dusty. If not, they were muddy. If a flock of sheep or goats had been driven down the road, there would be piles of manure to deal with. Even worse, since there was no public sanitation infrastructure, the streets and roads in the towns and villages served as open sewers. It would be impossible to arrive anywhere with clean feet.

Our reading for today, is set at that final meal that Jesus shared with his disciples. Shortly after the meal, Jesus would be betrayed and arrested. But our reading begins with the assurance that Jesus is well-aware of what is about to happen to him. He knows that his time is coming to a close. And yet, he is in control.

During the meal, Jesus gets up from the table, removes his outer robe, and ties a towel around himself. Taking a basin and pouring water into it, he goes around the room washing the feet of his disciples. They are not guests in someone's home. They have rented this room for the evening. The only "host" to show them hospitality is Jesus, himself.

When he gets to Simon Peter, Peter asks Jesus, *Lord, are you going to wash my feet?* And Jesus informs Peter that Peter does not know now what Jesus is doing. But later, in time, he will understand.

Peter argues with Jesus saying, *You will never wash my feet.* It's not difficult to see why Peter would object to having Jesus wash his feet. This is the task of a servant. And, to be honest, usually a young female servant—a girl. So, it is inconceivable to Peter that his teacher and master should humiliate himself to this base task of scraping crusted mud grime from his feet.

Jesus tells Peter that unless he allows him to actually wash his feet then Peter will have no investment with him. This act will build a connection between them.

Peter pushes back and says, *Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head.* By saying this, Peter is trying to reshape the situation. If Peter can get Jesus to wash his hands or his head, then the action becomes a religious event. The Jews practiced the ritual washing of hands before eating. Washing the head represents baptism. If Jesus does either of these, then (at least in Peter's eyes) Jesus will be elevated from servant to priest, and Peter's worldview will be preserved.

But Jesus stands firm. He washes Peter's feet and feet only. He performs the task as a servant. When he is finished, he puts his robe back on and returns to his place at the table. He then addresses those in the room and establishes himself as a model for them to follow. He says, *If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.*

Indeed, Jesus did set an example for all who would follow him. And if he had stopped there, we today would likely engage in a ritual foot washing, because Jesus instructed us to do so.

But the foot washing was not the point. It was the means to a much broader lesson. Jesus goes on to say, *Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them.* And yes, that is correct. Servants are not greater than their master. We all understand that. The student is not greater than the teacher; the subject is not greater than the king.

When Jesus does take on the role of servant, what happens? Is he just role-playing? Is he only pretending? No. He is teaching the disciples that when they wash the feet of another, they must become the servant both in action and in attitude. They must become truly humble in their chore. They are to look up, not down, at the person they are serving.

This is a difficult task that Jesus has assigned his followers. Not only are we called to serve others, but we are to do so as servants ourselves.

How often, when we help someone, do we judge them? do we put them down because we are helping them? Whether we are providing assistance to someone who is homeless, helping someone with their rent, loaning money to a relative to buy a car, or raking an elderly neighbor's leaves, when we do these things, it is difficult not reflect on how we are better because we are helping someone "less than" us. We may be serving, but because we see ourselves as "better than," we are not servants, and we do not love these people.

You may think that what Jesus is asking is impossible. How can we ever serve as servants? So, now, I would like to tell you about one person who did. His name is Henri Nouwen. You may have heard of him. He is one of the greatest theologians of our day. He was a priest, a teacher, a chaplain, and more. He taught at Notre Dame, Yale, Harvard, and other schools. He was a prolific author. My favorite Nouwen book is *The Wounded Healer*. I never met Father Nouwen, but I know people who knew him. They all spoke about his kind and loving nature.

Henri Nouwen was born in the Netherlands in 1932. His family was Catholic and from an early age he felt the call to the priesthood. He was ordained at age 25. After ordination, he continued his education studying psychology. He also worked as a pastor for a short time in the mines, became a chaplain in the army, and chaplain of the Holland-America Line accompanying immigrants to the United States. In time, he entered academia as a teacher. After Notre Dame, he taught at Yale for ten years. While there, he became interested in the plight of the poor in South American and moved to Peru for two years. He returned to teach at Harvard.

By happenstance, during his travels, Nouwen met the founder of L'Arche, an international movement of communities that welcome people with disabilities. He was so moved by the purpose and function of this community that he resigned from Harvard and moved to France where the original community of L'Arche was located. He then became pastor for the L'Arche community in Toronto where he lived for the last ten years of his life.

Nouwen believed that coming to this place was like coming to his true home. He lived in a house with people with disabilities and eventually was asked to help Adam Arnett, a severely disabled man, with his morning routine. Adam was the weakest and most disabled person in the community. Although he was in his twenties, he couldn't speak, couldn't dress himself, couldn't walk or eat without help. Shortly before he died, Nouwen wrote a small book called "Adam, God's Beloved." In this book, Nouwen describes how Adam became his friend, his teacher, and his guide.

In describing his days with Adam, Nouwen writes:

"It takes me about an hour and a half to wake Adam up, give him his medication, carry him into his bath, wash him, shave him, clean his teeth, dress him, walk him to the kitchen, give him his breakfast, put him in his wheelchair and bring him to the place where he spends most of the day with

therapeutic exercises. ... He does not cry or laugh. Only occasionally does he make eye contact. His back is distorted. His arm and leg movements are twisted. He suffers from severe epilepsy and, despite heavy medication, sees few days without grand-mal seizures. Sometimes, as he grows suddenly rigid, he utters a howling groan. On a few occasions I've seen one big tear roll down his cheek.”

Nouwen writes:

As I worked with Adam, I began to see myself right in the centre of [the community]. All my life had been shaped by words, ideas, books and encyclopedias. But now my priorities were shifting. What was becoming important for me was Adam and our privileged time together when he offered me his body in total vulnerability, when he gave me himself . . .

Adam was sent to bring Good News to the world. It was his mission, as it was the mission of Jesus. Adam was—very simply, quietly, and uniquely—there! He was a person, who by his very life announced the marvelous mystery of our God: I am precious, beloved, whole, and born of God. Adam bore silent witness to this mystery, which has nothing to do with whether or not he could speak, walk, or express himself, whether or not he made money, had a job, was fashionable, famous, married or single. It had to do with his being. He was and is a beloved child of God. It is the same news that Jesus came to announce, and it is the news that all those who are poor keep proclaiming in and through their very weakness. Life is a gift. Each one of us is unique, known by name, and loved by the One who fashioned us.

Father Nouwen tells this story:

“I still remember a woman visiting the New House, walking right up to Adam, and saying, 'Poor man, poor man, why did this happen to you? Let me pray over you so that our dear Lord may heal you.' She motioned the assistant to make a circle around Adam to pray. But one of them gently tapped her on the shoulder and said, 'Adam doesn't need any healing; he's fine. He is just happy that you came for dinner. Please join us at the table.'

Through Adam, Henri Nouwen learned to wash feet as Jesus instructed. It wasn't easy and it wasn't quick. But, as he writes, he learned to treasure Adam for what Adam could give him, not for what he could give Adam.

That is what Jesus calls his followers to do—to set aside our pride and insecurities, our arrogance and self-interest in order to love others as God loves them. To do this, we must learn to serve.