

**The Problem of Dirty Feet**  
Maundy Thursday (April 1, 2010)  
St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas  
John 13: 1-17, 31b-35  
By Richard Webb, Seminarian

They arrived in groups of twos and threes,  
talking loudly,  
laughing boisterously. . .

They were *Galileans*, all of them but one,  
and they were men of the sea,  
men of the soil,  
and—a couple—men of the sword.

They were all disciples of the Teacher and miracle worker called Jesus,  
and they entered, several at a time,  
into the upper room of the house in Jerusalem  
where they'd met before.

Jesus entered in the midst of them,  
and in the space of just a few minutes,  
all had assembled  
in the rectangular room with the low ceiling.

Suddenly, however, something changed.

Facial features which, moments ago,  
had been animated—  
smiling, laughing, talking—  
now reflected uncertainty and discomfort.

Though no one spoke of it,  
everyone in the room faced the same dilemma,  
everyone felt the same awkward apprehension.

You see,  
the roads and alleys that these men had traveled on their way to this "upper room"  
were not paved roads.  
In fact, in most cities of that time and place,  
paved roads were unheard of.

The streets that these men trod  
were more like winding dirt trails,  
all covered with a thick layer of dust.

Therefore, it was the custom for the host of a home to station a slave at the door to wash the feet of the dinner guests as they arrived.  
The servant knelt with a pitcher of water,  
a pan, and a towel  
and washed the dirt or mud off the feet of each guest as he or she prepared to enter the home. Shoes and sandals were left at the door.  
If a home could not afford a slave, then it was customary for one of the early arriving guests to graciously take upon himself the role of the servant and wash the feet of those who arrived after him.

To enter a banquet hall such as the upper room  
with unwashed feet  
was to them  
like entering a restaurant in our underwear  
might be to us.

So, though no one spoke of it,  
everyone faced the same dilemma:

someone really should wash their feet.

In the midst of the stilted conversation that revealed their discomfort,  
Jesus—their Teacher, their rabbi—  
strode quietly to the low table  
that occupied the center of the room.

The table was surrounded  
by cushioned couches,  
the head of each couch placed against the table  
like thirteen spokes in a wheel...

Jesus took his place at the table,  
reclining on one elbow,  
in such a position where he could survey all twelve of the men  
he had chosen to follow him.

And all twelve  
slowly  
as casually as they could manage,  
chose their places  
on the couches around the table. . .  
leaving  
the servant's pitcher, pan, and towel  
to sit undisturbed by the door.

The table was spread with plates and cups,  
and the fragrance of the roast lamb  
and the herbs  
and the bread  
mingled with the odor of the unwashed feet  
that hung over the ends of the couches.

A few awkward moments passed after the last man took the only remaining  
couch.

Jesus, without saying a word,  
slipped away from the table,  
silently pulled off his outer tunic,  
and with the towel, pitcher and pan in hand,  
knelt at the feet of the disciple nearest him.

What little hushed conversation there had been  
ceased.

Jesus moved quietly from man to man  
while every eye in the room  
followed him.

The disciples  
were speechless while he  
quickly and efficiently  
performed his servant's task,  
first pouring water from the pitcher over each pair of feet,  
allowing the basin on the floor beneath to catch the water and dirt that  
flowed down,  
then wiping his men's feet dry with the towel  
he had wrapped around his waist as an apron.

Having tenderly wiped the feet of Andrew,  
Jesus moved to the next couch,  
the one occupied by Peter.

Peter, visibly disturbed,  
drew his feet up onto the couch;  
"Lord," he said,  
"are you going to wash my feet?"

Reaching out a hand, Jesus gripped one of Peter's feet and pulled it back to  
the edge of the couch.

"You do not realize now what I am doing," Jesus said, "but later you will  
understand."

And Peter once again drew his feet away  
from Jesus and said, half pleading,  
half insisting,

"No... you shall never wash my feet."

Then Jesus, seeing Peter's pride disguised as humility, peered into the fisherman's eyes and said,

"Unless I wash you, you have no part with me."

Suddenly silenced by the severity of the Lord's words, Peter locked gazes with Jesus for a long moment while his mind whirred.

"Then, Lord," he said finally, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!"

"A person who has had a bath," he answered, matter-of-factly, without looking up from his chore, "needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean..."

and, quickly finishing his work at Peter's feet, he added,

"And you are clean...though not every one of you," referring, of course, to Judas, to whom he would come in a few moments.

Jesus continued then, washing the feet of his sheepish, embarrassed disciples,  
and then returned  
the pitcher, towel,  
and basin with the dirty water,  
to their place by the door.

Then, while every pair of eyes in the room watched, the Lord walked back to the couch he'd left empty a few moments ago and, looking round the company of the Twelve, he spoke.

"Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked....

And then, before anyone could answer, he continued:

"You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you."

And as Jesus spoke those words,  
each man recalled shamefully those moments when he had first entered the room,  
when each was too proud to take  
the basin and towel in hand  
and do what their Lord and Master had just done.

Twelve men got their feet washed that day. . .  
But there were thirteen men in that room.

From all appearances,  
Jesus returned to the table with unwashed feet.

Jesus went back to that table  
with dirty feet because, I believe —  
in some mystical but real way—  
when his followers do not serve each other,  
Jesus himself pays the price of their pride.  
**Jesus himself pays the price of OUR pride.**

When you and I do not serve each other—  
because we're unwilling to forgive,  
because we won't swallow our pride,  
because the task is somehow beneath us,  
because it's easier to let someone else do it,  
whatever the reason,  
in some mystical way, Jesus' feet go unwashed.

When you wash the feet of another,  
when you humbly serve a brother or sister,

when you give and expect nothing in return,  
when you cook a meal,  
rake the leaves,  
offer a ride,  
mop a floor,  
empty a bedpan,  
pay a compliment,  
surrender the spotlight,  
deflect the credit,  
shoulder the blame,  
share the burden,  
you are blessing not only that person,  
you are blessing the very heart of Jesus.

You are blessing the very heart of Jesus -  
When you wash dirty feet.

Amen.