

Christ connects us to one another

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Date: 27 September 2026

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[0:00] Thank you. Mike read to us these words from Luke's Gospel. Oh Lord, our strength and our Redeemer.

Amen. Last month, I realized a dream I have had for 50 years, giving my age away. I've had this dream for 50 years, ever since I was a student at the University of Edinburgh. My wife and I worshipped in the Maranatha Baptist Church in Plains, Georgia, in the USA. This church was founded when the original Baptist church in this town in the American Deep South refused to admit a black man into membership.

In protest at this decision, some members broke away to found a new Baptist church in Plains that welcomed people of all races.

[1:29] Among this church's founding members were a local peanut farmer and his wife, Jimmy and Rosalind Carter. Whatever you make of his presidency, Jimmy Carter's global work with Rosalind after he served as President of the United States was extraordinary.

The Carter Center he founded and led for decades after he was President continues to work today for human rights, for fair elections, for mental health, and the eradication of diseases in countries around the world.

For Jimmy and Rosalind Carter, this remarkable life of service to others was rooted in their weekly worship in that little local church in Plains, where they both served as deacons, what we would call elders.

When President Carter was born at the Bible class of the morning service, the church was packed every Sunday with visitors from across America and around the world.

You had to book advance tickets to get a seat on a Sunday morning. Now that's a church. But the Sunday we were there, just a few weeks ago, we joined a small congregation of no more than 20 or so people.

[3:01] With President Carter's passing at the age of 100, the crowds have long gone. But the local church members who welcomed us wanted us to know that their friend Jimmy had the cross above the pulpit and had made the wooden offering bowls they still used.

And they were keen for us, before we left town, to visit the Carters' modest graves in the grounds of their modest home. We don't have official saints in the Protestant tradition, but we are surrounded by what the Bible calls a great cloud of witnesses.

Those who, for all their flaws and failings as fellow sinners, have gone before us as faithful followers of Christ, filled with God's Spirit.

Those whose life and witness are an inspiration to all those of us who seek to follow Christ today. People in our own congregation, like Jim Gilmore.

But it is what Carter did after he stepped down that stays with me. As a young student studying politics, concerned about how to relate my Christian faith to public affairs, the newly elected President Jimmy Carter was an inspiration to me.

[4:31] He spoke openly and unapologetically of how his Christian faith shaped both his personal life and his public service. He was the first born-again President.

And cynics mocked him for it. But as I said, it's what Jimmy Carter did after he stepped down from the most powerful elected office in the world that moves me most.

He didn't leverage his presidency for celebrity. He humbled himself and served in his local church as he heroically served with his wife Rosalyn, a wider world in need.

So why did Jimmy Carter do that with his life after he was President? Some will say that was just in his nature. Some people just like to help others.

And that's true. But what makes some people who have held power step down and serve the needs of others instead of leveraging their political status for private gain when they're in office and after they leave office, as tragically so many political leaders now do around the world?

[5:53] We know who they are. We don't have to name them. I think the answer lies in an incident recorded in the Gospels.

Not in today's reading from Luke's Gospel, which we'll come to in a moment, but the one pictured on our screen. Here we see a drawing of Jesus washing the disciples' feet.

It is based on a passage in John's Gospel, chapter 13. There Jesus is preparing his disciples to face his death on a cross.

During a Passover meal with them, we read, Jesus got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing and wrapped a towel around his waist.

After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him. The disciples were mortified and shocked that their master would do something so degrading in their culture.

[7:07] Foot washing was regarded as such a menial task that Jewish slaves in a household were exempt from doing it for guests and visitors. Washing your guests' feet was reserved for Gentile slaves, foreigners.

And yet here was Jesus, God's anointed one, freely doing the lowly work of a slave and washing their dirty, smelly feet.

Why? Jesus was doing two things here. He was preparing his disciples for the greater washing he was about to do.

Washing away not the dust from their feet, but the sins from their lives. By his even greater act of humiliation, a shameful death on the cross.

The public execution that the Romans reserved for despised slaves and defeated enemies. But Jesus was also practicing what he preached by washing the disciples' feet.

[8:20] In our reading for today from Luke's Gospel, after an argument among the disciples as to who was the greatest among them, Jesus tells the disciples that they must not be like the kings of the Gentiles who love to rule over others and lord it over them.

Rather, says Jesus, if you're going to follow me, you must follow my example and serve other people. In God's kingdom, he teaches them, greatness lies in service, not in status.

Now we have to pause here for a moment. Like the Lord's Prayer we considered two Sundays ago, like the story of the Good Samaritan we read last Sunday, the story of Jesus washing the disciples' feet may be so familiar to us, those of us who've grown up in the church, that we almost take it for granted.

But in fact, this act of feet washing, this simple gesture that anticipates Christ's death on the cross is nothing less than a turning point in history.

Here again, the words of Jesus, which John's Gospel tells us he said as he performed as a slave, washing his disciples' dirty feet.

[9:55] The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you. Rather, the greatest among you must become like the youngest and the leader like one who serves.

For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table that I am among you? I am among you as one who serves.

We need only read our history books or this morning's news headlines or our online news feeds to know how seductive power and status are for human beings.

Jill described that beautifully in her prayer. Sadly, we see this not only among those who strut the world stage today as tyrants, but also among those who abuse power and seek status under the guise of leading churches and charities.

But here is Jesus calling those who would lead in any sphere of life, calling us to another way, his way, the way of service, symbolized so memorably in this gesture of washing the disciples' dirty feet, anticipating washing away their sins through his blood on the cross.

[11:21] I am among you as one who serves. The leader among you must be like the one who serves. Jesus connects us to one another by calling on us to serve one another as he first served us.

Now there are two dangers here for us as Christians in seeing in Christ's gesture of feet washing his call to serve one another.

The first danger is confusing Christ's call to service with subservience. We are not called to be doormats, abused by others under the guise of serving them.

Too often, men in particular have exploited the service of women in that way, not least shamefully in the history of the church. The second danger is to use the claim to be serving God as a guise for serving one's own interests.

That is why in the story of the Lord's Supper in Luke's Gospel that comes immediately before Christ's teaching here on true greatness, we learn of Judas who sat at the supper with the other disciples but was intent on betraying Jesus.

[12 : 44] As my minister once said from the pulpit, some people like to serve God but only in an advisory capacity. how are we to avoid these dangers?

Jimmy Carter wrote about his life of faith while President of the United States, facing life and death decisions about the use of his powers but also the temptation to abuse his power.

This is what he said, I started each day by reciting one or two brief thoughts while walking past the Rose Garden on the way from our living quarters in the White House to the Oval Office.

One of those thoughts was a verse from the 19th Psalm. Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.

And then Carter wrote, the effort to maintain a partnership with God was reassuring to me and at the same time a humbling experience helping me in my effort to resist the temptations of isolation and arrogance as president that all leaders face.

[14 : 10] You see, we can only serve one another as we humble ourselves daily before God in prayer, asking God to enable us to resist the temptation of arrogance, lording it over others rather than serving them in love as Christ first served us.

And as the story of the Good Samaritan reminds us, service is a two-way thing. We must be humble enough to be surprised by strangers and open to their willingness to serve us in need.

And so do you see how everything connects? In the prayer Jesus taught us, in the story Jesus told us, and in the gesture Jesus gave us.

Christ connects us to God through a prayer, the Lord's prayer. The prayer that our Lord teaches us connects us to a heavenly Father who is concerned about our life in the real world.

A world of hunger and debt, a world of sin and evil, but a world that God is transforming through his coming rule on earth as in heaven through Jesus Christ.

[15 : 26] And Christ connects us to our neighbor through a story, the story of a good Samaritan, the story that Jesus tells us is of a despised foreigner and heretic who showed mercy to a stranger in need.

In calling us to go and do likewise, Jesus is expanding the circle of our love beyond those like us so that we see in the face of our neighbor, the face of Christ.

Christ connects us to one another, finally, through a gesture, washing the disciples' feet. What is extraordinary about the story of Jesus washing the disciples' feet is the identity of the one who acted as a servant, Jesus himself.

The disciples discovered that it was not only their Lord and teacher who washed their feet. The disciples would slowly learn after Christ's resurrection that their master was none other than God himself come among them.

God's son who left his place in glory and humbled himself and took on the form of a slave and said to them, I am among you as one who serves.

[16 : 48] And here at the Lord's table, Jesus connects us to himself again through a meal. Here Jesus serves us afresh with his broken body and his shed blood as we eat this bread and drink this cup, the sign and seal of his new bond of love between God and us.

So, sisters and brothers in Christ, as we gather now around the Lord's table, remembering that he came among us to wash away our sin through his death for us on the cross.

Let us serve one another as Christ first served us. And let us go from this table out into the world God loves to serve one another and our neighbor in need.

In the name of Christ, who is still among us by his Holy Spirit as one who serves. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.