

Your Personal File

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 09 March 1994

Preacher: Harry Robinson

[0 : 0 0] Well, this passage from John 13 continues the story of Jesus washing his disciples' feet, which, I don't know, it's a peculiar kind of story, I think, in lots of ways.

I thought about it this way, you see. It seems to be a good thing to do, and therefore I wondered if it was possible that the large multinational corporation to which you belong got orders from headquarters that because this seemed to have a kind of therapeutic effect among the staff, that it would be standard procedure from now on, that on Mondays at 10 o'clock, the chief executive officer of the local branch would, in the main reception area, wash the feet of all the company vice presidents.

And then at 12 o'clock, the vice presidents will wash the department manager's feet. That would be the next step.

And at 2 o'clock, the department managers will wash the salesperson's feet. And at 4, the salesperson's will wash the feet of the administrative staff.

And at 6 o'clock, the administrative staff will wash the caretaker's feet before they clean the whole place up. And the notice would be given that anyone not willing to conform to this can pick up their check at 5 o'clock on Monday.

[2 : 0 4] So, somehow, I don't think that would work. So that we're caught in that wonderful ambiguity between knowing that it's probably a good thing to wash each other's feet, and yet, in fact, implementing it seems a little out of line.

The church tries to do it, but it doesn't, it makes a, it's not an easy thing to do, to get away with it. It looks pretty good. But I think it's now several hundred years since the monarch of England actually went to Westminster Abbey on Maundy Thursday and washed the feet of several poor people from London.

That used to be done. A kind of attempt to literally obey what is spoken of here. But there is, there's problems with it.

It doesn't, it doesn't, it doesn't work. I mean, we don't have that kind of, well, the, the purpose of it, of course, would be the, that it would, it would create a kind of healing of the relationship all the way down the line.

That everybody would be on a better relationship, and everybody would know that this procedure on Monday morning established the relationship of everybody in the office to everybody else in the office.

[3 : 4 0] And it would really be a very healing, therapeutic, cleansing time. I mean, and if anybody suffered from having smelly feet or something, that would be dealt with right there.

And so, that would be right. So that what you have is a whole company of people who are relating to one another by taking the positive action of washing each other's feet.

That's a, it's a, there's a, there's an intimacy and an involvement to that which is quite striking. Now, what I would like to suggest, you know, and this is just hearsay from my point of view, but I, that in most companies, the basic activity which everybody gets involved in is, in fact, slinging dirt.

Getting caught up on all the scandal and finding out who's doing what that they shouldn't be doing and how the thing should be, you know, and in a sense, exchanging the latest gossip or who's going to lose their job or who's going to get the job or who's been running around with who and all those kinds of things.

That that seems to be the kind of natural medium into which we all fall. That's the thing the vice presidents and the chief executive officers talk about to each other, and then that passes all the way down the line.

[5 : 08] And there are certain experts at it who become focuses for knowing what's going on, so that you have a community quite opposite to the one that is being set up here, where slinging dirt is really what keeps people in relationship to one another, and that's how our world works.

You know that if in that process somebody steps out of line, you know, and doesn't join in that process, they tend to be excluded or to be closed out.

Well, the difficulty, you see, is that it's a lot easier to set up a structure in which you recognize that there are people who are there whose sole function is to serve you.

We understand that, and we set things up in that way. It comes very naturally to us that my world is that of which I am the center, and everybody else has their significance insofar as they serve my purposes.

So that what Jesus is suggesting here is fairly radically different than anything we would ever arrive at by instinctive behavior. Our instinctive behavior is to see our world serving our purposes.

[6 : 31] And that's, I think, what Jesus is challenging. Now, the church tends to be a place where the only people who go there are the people who are already clean.

And so they don't know. There's no necessity to wash feet there because everybody's good when they get there. I mean, they're in their Sunday best with their...

And it's funny, isn't it, how that perversity has crept into the church and how people know that the function of the church is somehow to make clean people know how clean they are.

And in fact, it doesn't often work. It doesn't seem to worry anybody. But we sort of persist in that kind of ideology.

The point that is made in this passage, and if you look at the text, you'll see it, where it says, you see, when Jesus puts his question to the disciples, do you understand?

[7 : 45] Now, this is the same thing that when Jesus said to Peter, when Peter refused to have his feet, he said, you don't understand now, but you will.

Now the thing is over, and he says to them, do you understand? And basically, the contention that is at the root of this particular passage is that the behavior which you display is because of the experience that you have had.

So that it's very important for you in these terms to say that this behavior comes from something I have known and understood.

So Jesus has washed their feet. He says, now I want you to understand the implications of that. And so that God's treatment of us is to do something for us, out of which we are then to know how to behave, which is contrary to the usual idea that we do something, you know, we behave and God will do something for us.

But it's, as I've tried to tell you in probably a million seconds, that what's implied here is that something is done for you, and you have seen that, you have understood that.

[9 : 13] And that's why Jesus asks them, do you understand what has happened here? What I have done. You call me teacher and Lord, and rightly so, for that is what I am.

So he knew that position, and they knew it and recognized it, and they had experienced that. And it was their teacher and their Lord. You relate to a Lord as a servant relates to a master.

You relate to a teacher as a disciple relates to a teacher. So that you are the servant and the pupil of the teacher and Lord, the Lord and teacher.

And therefore, if he does that, then what he is doing is reversing the usual order in which things happen. And, of course, what he's teaching us is that in our world, the presence of the kingdom should be determined by the experience of the order being reversed.

The usual order that is the pattern in our lives. So you have that problem. And I think that's what undermines.

[10 : 24] That's why I think the idea of being politically correct grates on us. Because I think the thing that being politically correct makes it difficult is that no matter how you feel, and no matter what your aboriginal background is, no matter where you come from, this is how you are to behave.

And Jesus is wise enough to recognize that people won't do that unless they have some basis of experience, something that they have known and understood, then they won't be able to do it.

And that's why I think being politically correct is such a difficult concept for government to be able to establish. Because you can't get people to behave except out of what they already have known and understood.

And so if you're going to change people, you've got to give them a brand new experience. And what Jesus did in the beginning of teaching his disciples was to give them a brand new experience.

And that brand new experience was when he set his robe aside, took the basin and the towel, and knelt down before each of them and washed their feet. And he said, now this is the thing that I want you to see.

[11 : 40] And out of this, then you will know how you are to behave. And that's why I think, you know, I think the assumptions that we make about humanity when we try and impose political correctness on it are just not valid.

You can't do it that way. I mean, you can try it. But I don't think it works. Now, you can, obviously, I may be totally wrong about that.

But I at least have raised the issue. You can think about it and see what you make about it. Now, when it comes, you see, to what Jesus is doing, he's doing it with the disciples.

In other words, he wants to create a community in which this reverse order actually happens. So that what you and I are called to is that kind of community.

It's a radically different kind of community. You know, the church as a community always tends to go back to its worldly experience and to govern and control itself in the same way that the world does around it.

[12 : 53] And instead of it being the radically different community, which it is advocated that it should be, where instead of slinging dirt about one another, gossiping about one another, maligning one another, being shocked by one another, we are open to and aware of one another, and are involved in the business of cleansing and healing on a continuing basis.

What God has done for us in Christ is represented by baptism and the sacrament of the Holy Communion. This has been done for you. Now, there is a maintenance program that goes with that, and that is that you confess your sins one to another, and you pray for one another that you may be healed.

That's the process that's to go on in the church. Not that we set one another up on a pedestal and say, don't you dare fall off, but that we recognize that unless the maintenance program is maintained, you're going to get into trouble, and that this is the way we all live.

And we shouldn't be shocked or surprised when people get into trouble. And what we should do is perhaps not always say, well, they never understood in the first place what it really meant to be a Christian.

What you need to recognize in many instances is that the maintenance program has not been followed through in the community of Christians, where we confess our sins one to another, we pray for one another, we do what Jesus suggests here, we wash one another's feet.

[14 : 35] We're in the business of setting people up as cleansed and ready for work rather than defiled and ready for discharge.

And that's how it works. So that when, and I hope this isn't too corny for you, but when the leading member of the bass section in the choir runs away with the leading soprano, you can know that there's been a shift in understanding what the church is all about.

You know, and it's not enough to just point the finger and say, those people have failed. It looks to me like there is some grounds for saying that the maintenance program on those two people highly involved in the life of the congregation has not been carried out.

Now, what happens, you see, is that, I mean, when that kind of lightning bolt news hits the congregation, that this has taken place, you know, well, it's really a matter of, you know, closing the door after the horse is gone.

You know, that it's, something should have happened a long time. I mean, it's a terrible problem to deal with in the life of a congregation because so much damage has been done by then.

[16 : 04] And trying to, trying to put it, to bring it right is, is extremely difficult. And you've got to remember that people in the course of their daily lives, in the course even of living within the congregation of Christian people, are wading through muck up to their knees every day.

And if you don't expect them to be defiled by that and to need cleansing, then you're not being realistic. We need that from one another on a continuing maintenance basis.

And so, you, you respect that. You, you recognize that, I mean, you can look at the thing and say, well, perhaps this base in the choir is like a Judas.

And that though he was wearing his choir robes and singing in the choir and in front of the congregation week after week after week, he never had, he always had a totally different agenda.

Which is what I, I mean, the story of Judas is. He had a completely different agenda. Though he sat at the supper, though his feet were washed, all those things, he nevertheless had a totally different agenda.

[17 : 16] And, uh, that was, uh, that could be what was at, at the basis of the problem. Or he may have been like Peter and said, you'll never wash my feet.

You know, because pride and arrogance somehow goes with people who are at church very often. I mean, the very fact that they got up and got there tends to give them grounds for pride. And, uh, to let them know that they're better than the average run of people.

So, uh, to say with Peter, you'll not wash my feet. You know, that may be for some no good off the street, but it's not for me.

And so, like Peter, they might say that, uh, well, I don't want to, I don't want to submit to that. uh, I'm certainly prepared to help wash other people's feet, but I certainly don't want it to happen to me.

And, uh, and of course, that's, that's so much the way we think as human beings. And, uh, the way we badly let each other down by letting each other get away with that kind of thinking.

[18 : 17] Uh, it may be that, uh, that what, what happened to this, to this man is that, uh, uh, he, he recognized that he was possessed of a great gift.

The, the wonderful, deep, rich, baritone voice that thrilled the congregation from Sunday to Sunday. And he found all his religious fulfillment in doing that.

And he did, and he paid his dues, as it were, week after week by giving them that for which he got very little return. And so he had the sense that, uh, he had done all that could be expected of him and the church and God probably owed him something.

And, uh, he was collecting on that. That's, uh, what he thought he was doing. The, uh, the, uh, the other possibility is that, uh, he may have fallen in love.

because I'm old and cynical and not young and lusty like all of you, I, uh, I, uh, I want to remind you that, uh, love is, uh, is not just, uh, it's not an infatuation.

[19 : 39] Uh, love is something which the New Testament consistently makes a command of. You love, why? Because you're told to.

Because you're commanded to. Now, you see, uh, people are very religious about love and when they fall in love they feel that there's a great conspiracy of heaven that is leading them in a certain direction and it would be wrong for them to go in any other direction but that and there it is.

They're in love. Well, that is, let me say, unacceptable. because, uh, that's not how it works and, uh, and, and you can't, you can't assume that even though it, it feels very religious to do that.

I mean, it's sort of like somebody giving their life to God to work on a foreign field that, that, that is a direction that they have received and they've got to go. Well, this isn't quite of the same order as that and, uh, it's, it's wise if you, if you recognize it.

So that, what you have is, you have this catastrophe hitting a congregation and you see that what has happened over a period perhaps of months and perhaps even of years that these two people in the congregation, that the basis on which they were serving in the congregation was, uh, was fundamentally that, uh, that, that something had shifted.

[21 : 14] It's, it's like what is described in Galatians where it says they now have another gospel. They now have another way they know and understand things. Something has moved in on them.

They now know differently. Before they used to live that way and behave that way because they knew one thing, but now they know something entirely different. And that's had to shift. And I think, and I don't think I'm being speculative, I think when people respond in this way, it's not just spontaneous response to something, it's because something basically has shifted in their understanding of who they are.

And now they're behaving in a way which, uh, is consistent with a new way of thinking. They've ceased to understand the basis of their relationship to God.

They've ceased to understand what Jesus is trying to show the disciples here, and that is that, uh, by washing their feet and then saying, if I, your Lord and teacher, wash your feet, you ought to wash one another's.

So that he gives them first a parable of how he relates to them by washing their feet. That's the parable in which they are to see the, the, the reality of the kingdom.

[22 : 33] It's something radically different. He gives them the parable to see, and then out of that parable he says, now this is how you are to behave. You are to wash one another's feet.

And that, that becomes the, uh, the example which has been, which has been established. So he gives the parable, and then he gives the example of how it's to be worked out in your lives, and then he tells them that, if you look at that last line, you see, now that you know these things, you'll be blessed if you do them.

And you see, that's why the, the Christian community is built on the preaching of the gospel, the preaching of Jesus Christ, the preaching of God who became flesh and dwelt among us and lived in obedience to the Father and died on the cross.

That's what you know. And on the basis of knowing that, this is how you behave. You see, well now, that's, and that's why Christians keep getting into trouble with our world because our, our world is prepared to behave in any way which seems to them pragmatic, which seems to them understandable.

they, they, they, they can drink whiskey by the court without recognizing the problem of alcoholism that underlies it.

[24 : 01] They can behave in such a way without realizing the gospel which underlies it, underlies the whole of their behavior. And so, that's what Jesus is trying to enforce with his disciples by the parable of washing their feet, by the example that he then takes it to be, and by the blessing which he says comes out of it, and that is that now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

And that's why we need to help one another and to have this ministry to one another, because to help make the connection, to maintain the connection between what you know of Jesus Christ and how you are expected to behave out of that.

And that's the ministry that we're to have to one another. And that's why Jesus says to his disciples, I've done this for you, now you are to do it for one another. And that's the kind of relationship we have.

And we're not to turn a blind eye until the great affair booms on the headlines of the newspaper. We're to run a continuing maintenance program with one another, dealing with one another, washing one another's feet, not deceiving one another into helping them to think better than the truth of themselves, but healing one another by helping them to think in realistic terms about themselves and to deal with themselves in that realistic way.

And then he said, Jesus says, you will be blessed because what you have seen, what you have known, you now do. Well, that's that is that passage.

[25 : 47] We'll go on from there next week, but I guess I'm a bit disappointed in the passage because it really is so ordinary, isn't it?

It doesn't tell you to do something really very heroic. It says, wash each other's feet. You know, don't let each other go in some illusion about themselves until they are in crisis, which is uncontrollable.

Maintain the relationship to one another of washing one another's feet. Somebody came to me yesterday to tell me a story sort of like this, you know, a year after the fact, and said, what?

And you just realize that the opportunity of ministering to one another was missed, not over a period of weeks or over a period of months. And finally, the whole basis of that person's life shifted away from the reality of the grace of God in the gospel to something else.

And then suddenly demonstrating that shift was this erratic behavior. fear. And they have to be brought back to the understanding of Jesus when he walks down and washes their feet and says, as I have done to you, so do you to one another.

[27 : 13] And that's a powerful responsibility that we have. Let me pray. Our God and Father, thank you that you are so intimately and profoundly involved in every breath we breathe, in every beat of our heart, in every word on our lips, in every relationship in the constellation of our lives.

And we ask that central to that may be the person of the one whom we call teacher and Lord. Lord. And because we call him teacher and Lord, help us to go on learning from him and living in obedience to him.

And as he has helped us, so we are to help one another in living in submission to one another and in love for one another, expressed in the practical realities of our daily relationships.

We ask this in the name of him who is teacher and Lord, even Jesus Christ. Amen.