

I'm going to ask you to do something dirty tonight. Yes, this is a family friendly service. But this might be even dirtier than where your mind first went.

I'm talking about actual dirt.

When's the last time you stepped in dirt? Without your shoes on? Where it squished between your toes, got under your nails? Has it been days, weeks, years?

Perhaps you can more easily think about the last time you stepped in metaphorical dirt. Did something wrong, put your foot in your mouth, hurt someone, felt dirty out of guilt or shame. A common saying around my home as a child, when you knew you did something wrong, and you knew you couldn't get away with it, was, "My name is gonna be mud!" That was when you knew you stepped in it. And you knew mom and dad were going to find out. Because you couldn't hide the evidence –it was caked between your toes.

But mostly we *can* hide the dirt, or think we can. With my work at The Night Ministry, I was at the Broadway Youth Center a couple weeks ago, talking with a young person who was in the clothing bank looking for new shoes. As he was taking his old shoes off, embarrassed, he warned me, "My feet really stink." He went on to say, "Because I don't have anyplace to live right now, I walk a lot, and my feet....they really stink." I smiled and assured him, "Oh, don't worry, everyone's feet are smelly." And then he took his shoes off. But I'm a professional, I kept a straight face, not wanting to shame this young person or make him feel bad. I helped him find some shoes, and a clean pair of socks. He started to put on the new socks, quickly trying to cover his feet (and hoping to cover the smell as well). And I casually reminded him, we have a shower and clean towels if you want to wash your feet before you put the new socks on.

The thought hadn't even occurred to him. More than wanting clean feet, he wanted to appearance of clean feet with new socks and shoes masking the stink underneath.

We *do* all have stinky feet, probably literally, but at least figuratively. And we need more than clean socks. We need to be washed. I was talking to someone in our community a few weeks ago who mentioned that growing up, his faith community held foot washing services throughout the year, because it was so central to who they were. Makes sense to me. And then he said, "but you better show up with clean feet!"

And that made sense to me, too. It often seems as if we only show up to church if we're clean and fresh, or at least look that way. With the inventions of foot powder, access to clean socks, small-talk, the ability to swallow feelings and fears, the gift and curse of being able to put on a happy face, we may most of the time be able to hide the dirt and stink that lurks beneath. And maybe that's the problem.

People often stay away from church when they are going through hard times, when they feel confused or uncertain, when they feel hopeless or angry. Because if you can actually see the dirt, the hurt, the stink, the pain, and can't hide it, then it's real and you want to hide more than your feet. Especially when everyone else always looks so fresh, so clean, so put together.

Clean feet weren't an option during Jesus' time. The streets were dirty – and not just with the dusty road, but with garbage, mud, and even manure. And people walked barefoot or in simple sandals. When you arrived at a house for dinner, the washing of your feet was as much for the host of the party as it was for you. But this act was performed by a servant or slave so the host wouldn't spoil their appetite with your feet.

But no one did that job tonight, this night that Jesus gathered with his disciples. Midway through dinner, everyone was eating and drinking, still in their dusty, dirty feet. So Jesus “got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.”

Various traditions sprung up commemorating this act. In England, the custom of feet washing by the monarch was carried out until 1689, the true sign of the rich and powerful becoming humble servants. The ruling King or Queen would wash the feet of the poor on Maundy Thursday in Westminster Abbey. Of course, the feet were first washed by one of the servants before the monarch had to wash them and kiss them.

Jesus doesn’t have someone else do a pre-wash. He holds those dirty, raw, stinky feet in his own hands. By the time he was finished, his towel was brown with dirt, his basin water clouded.

The disciples just thought they were coming over for dinner. But this is Jesus’ last meal, his hour had come, later this night he will be arrested. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas to betray him. Things were looking pretty bleak.

This can be a bleak night for us, too. Tonight the altar is stripped, the emptiness made visible, perhaps mirroring our own state some days.

In the darkness and starkness of Jesus’ last night he offers no new mission strategies, no escape plans, no rallying cries, no solutions.

Jesus’ response in the face of this bleak picture, was to take a towel, a bowl and his hands, kneel before his friends and disciples, and wash their feet.

What is our response to the darkness, the emptiness?

One author offers, “When the night falls, when hope dies out, we practice foot washing. We create spaces where the love of God may flow into our worlds – into our feet and through our hands. Foot-washing is our protest of hope, that Christ’s love is still here, available, where we walk with our feet and where we serve with our hands.”

And part of the protest of hope is having dirt worth washing. Because church is not only a place where one *could* come with dirty feet, but where you *should* come with dirty feet.

An old rabbi once instructed his disciples, “Cover yourself with the dust of your rabbi’s feet.” The idea being that as a student, a disciple, you would follow your rabbi and their every move. So that by the end of a day of walking in the path directly behind their rabbi, the students would have the dust from his feet all over them. And that was a good thing.

Are we following Jesus closely enough to get dirty?

A woman working in a soup kitchen in Richmond, Virginia frustrated about the disconnect between volunteers and those served, started a foot-washing ministry to the homeless. Now, before lunch they wash their guests’ feet, soaking them in warm water, rubbing the feet with home-made massage oils, trimming nails and fitting feet with brand new socks. Following closely enough to get dirty.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel took his feet to Selma in 1965, to march with Martin Luther King Jr for civil rights. When asked why a man such as himself would join this event, he replied, “When I march in Selma, my feet are praying.” Following closely enough to get dirty.

Where is our rabbi, teacher, Lord, going that we are to closely follow? Tonight he is going to the floor, to his knees. “So 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...”

“I have set you an example” – be a servant, touch wounded, scarred, stinky, dirty places...and...allow others to touch those places in you. Let someone else wash your feet. Sit there and be uncomfortable. Yes, most of us can wash our own feet, but here we learn how to receive love. We let go of ourselves and let someone else pick up our bare feet.

We should show up to church dirty, in need of fresh, cleansing water, whether our dirt is dust from the rabbis’ feet, or the dirt of despair, betrayal, fear.... Jesus washes *all* the disciples’ feet – even Judas, the very feet about to run off and sell him into the hands of his killers, and the feet of those who will desert and deny him only moments from now.

So tonight we’re going to practice doing something dirty. Walking the path of discipleship that leads us into the dirt, and into each other’s hands, and down to each other’s feet. Whether you came with clean feet or dirty feet tonight, we will all be dirty soon – dirty with the dust of discipleship. As you come forward tonight, I invite you to take off your socks and shoes, walk down the center aisle, feel the sand squish between your toes, the dust finding its way into the crevices. Let the dirt make a mess in this church. Let the dirt lead you to a pitcher, a basin, a towel. To someone else’s hands. To Christ’s hands.

And then, follow their example, kneeling before another dirty disciple, the love of Christ working through your hands and through their feet..... “By *this* everyone will know you are my disciples,” says Jesus, “if you have love for one another.”