

Why is foot washing so necessary?
Sermon on John 13: 1-15

Sisters and brothers,

From an early age we are taught to stand up for ourselves, to fight for our rights, and be strong. These are not necessarily bad qualities. In fact, these are often quite admirable, especially when it comes to the defence of those in need.

Strength is both: useful, and even necessary at times.

Strength is often a personal characteristic one needs to draw from in order to handle and perform extreme tasks. Strength is in many and most instances good.

Jesus had strength.

He was without doubt powerful.

The stormy seas obeyed the power of his voice.

He had the power to heal the sick and perform incredible, miraculous deeds. It seemed, there was nothing he could not do. His strength and power were unmatched. But for Jesus, it was never about his strength or his abilities. It was never about his apparent omnipotent power. For Jesus, it was all about service, humbleness, - and weakness too.

Jesus understood that one cannot know strength without knowing weakness. His ministry was not, in the first place, about the things he could do, but about what he was willing to do for others.

He didn't want to be known by his power.

He wanted to be known by his service.

Jesus recognized how out of balance our world becomes when we begin to over-value power. He witnessed what happens when strength is associated only with power. He came face to face with the lepers and outcasts who were cast out of the villages and cities. He encountered people who had lost everything: the beggars, the homeless, the poor. He spent time with the sick, the blind, the lame... He encouraged little children to come to him. Jesus sought out the tax collectors, the sinners, the detested... He didn't shut them out but recognized that they, too, needed love and fellowship.

In his day the people Jesus sought were not the politicians or the religious leaders. He did not desire an audience with the king or with Caesar. He didn't spend his days conversing with the priests in the temple. He was not among the respectable leaders. One only needs to look at the people Jesus associated with to get a sense of his values. All these groups Jesus met had in common powerlessness. And those in power often had already decided their fate.

Sadly the world has not changed that much since the days of Jesus.

We still live in a world totally out of balance.

It's a world built on power.

Power is king, and the desire for more power continues a vicious cycle of the powerful seeking more power without end.

Nations rule through power.
Politicians run around constantly seeking more power.
In the parliaments it's not about the welfare of the people, it is about the status, the success, and the power of the individual politician.
Everybody wants more – power, money, bank accounts, houses, cars...
Corporations want more.
Politicians and leaders want more.
The rich want more.
Power is a hunger that cannot be satisfied.

Our out of balance world goes way beyond this.
We still view strength through power.
We privilege the strong over the weak.
Our world is one where violence still rules.
It's a world where we still choose to settle our conflicts through bombs and arms rather than through peaceful and intelligent communication.
In our everyday life the power of violence fills our homes, our streets, and our communities.
Each look at the daily news is an encounter with new horrors of violence. We switch on the television or our news app or open the paper in the morning – only to learn about new instances of mass shootings, murder, oppression, racism, hatred and selfishness. And often violence is mistakenly seen as strength.

Why do we tolerate this?
Why do we privilege power?
Why do we want power?
Why can we not think outside the realm of power?
Why?

It's because we are afraid of weakness.

Therefore we desire and seek power in whatever form that may be.
Weakness has no place in our lives and in our world.

This is certainly not the world that Jesus dreamed of.
He was talking about the kingdom of God.
But where is it?
Where are the meek?
Where are the peacemakers?
Where are the poor?
Where are those who mourn?
I thought these were the ones who would inherit the earth?
Instead of valuing the weak, the defenceless, the humble – we have sided with the powerful, the rich and the successful.

And often it appears that our churches, in many places of this world, have more in common with the powerful rather than the powerless.

What can our response to that be?

I am wondering what needs to change in our world.

I am wondering what needs to change in Christianity so that it is less about buildings and bank accounts, and more about people.

Is there a practice or a symbol that visibly demonstrates the message of Christ?

And here I discover the foot washing.

In that upper room Jesus does something totally remarkable. It is so subtle and unassuming that it is easy to miss.

In this act Jesus does not give great speeches or profound teachings.

There are no big crowds, no sermons on the mount, no raising of the dead, no healing of the sick, and no feeding of the 5000 and more.

Instead Jesus does something so humble, and so weak that even Christians have for centuries failed to realise its implications.

Imagine, there in Jerusalem, the upper room, in the course of a meal, Jesus rises up and removes his outer robe, the robe that confers dignity.

He puts a towel around his waist, takes a basin, puts water in it, and then kneels before his disciples and begins to wash their feet.

This is a sign of his extreme love for them.

He washes them with love...

And Peter reacts: "Lord, you wash my feet?"

Jesus responds, "You do not understand now; later you will understand."

"No, you will never wash my feet!" Peter argues.

And we can understand Peter.

He was following a leader, and now this leader kneels before them!

For Peter this is a degrading gesture, a gesture of weakness; it is impossible!

But Jesus answers Peter: "If I do not wash your feet, you can have nothing more to do with me. There would be no more sharing between us; you would no longer be my disciple, or my friend. In short, if I don't wash your feet, you can leave."

Peter, shaken, says: "Then not only my feet, but my head and my hands as well!" Peter does not understand. Would we?

Here is a moment of crisis for Jesus' friends. He wants to live a real friendship with them. He offers a relationship not just of superiority, but of love.

Peter cannot accept the sight of Jesus seemingly degrading himself. The terms that Jesus uses: "If I do not wash your feet, you will have no part with me," are severe, as if to say: "If I do not wash your feet, you can leave!"

The words of Jesus reveal something important. Jesus, kneeling as a slave, is not just performing a gesture of humility; Jesus reveals to his friends who God is.

Jesus washes the disciples' feet. He does this with tenderness, even with joy. He must have taken each foot with gentleness.

And as he washes, he cleanses their wounds with care and compassion.

He seems to say to each one of them: "I have confidence in you. And I love you. Now, stand up. Stand up because I need you on your feet to go around the world to announce the good news.

Once he'd washed his friends' feet, he puts his robe back on, sits down and says to them: "Do you understand what I have just done to you? You call me Master and Lord, and so I am, and if I the Lord and Master washed your feet, so you must also wash each other's feet. This is the example that I have given you, so that you will do among yourselves what I have done for you."

Have we failed to realize that the ministry and message of Jesus is found in foot washing?

Have we misunderstood, have we underestimated the significance and importance of the act of foot washing?

Doesn't foot washing demonstrate what Christianity should be about?

...that Christianity is not built on strength or power, but on weakness?

The theologian John Caputo argues that theology should be weak. He claims that mainstream theology embraces the wrong values. He emphasizes a theology of liberation which instead of seeking power focuses on embracing weakness.

Weakness is embracing the marginalized and the outcasts.

Weakness is identifying with the poor rather than the rich.

Weakness is striving for humility.

Weakness is a countercultural movement against the selfish, power hungry, violent, and destructive culture that we live in.

Weakness, so John Caputo, is the message and life of Jesus.

And yes, it is found in the beatitudes, it is found in Jesus' life as a servant for others, it is found in his preference for the lowest of the low in the society he lived in.

Weakness is the reason Jesus kept saying radical things like; "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

Weakness is the message of foot washing.

It's the message Jesus was sharing with his friends.

And his friends found it so hard to grasp.

Are we so different from them?

Isn't our first instinct to say "no" to weakness?

And by doing so we say "no" to the values Jesus lived and taught.

Instead we want to be leaders, we want to build great buildings, we want to influence thousands, and we want to do and do and do.

But this was never the message of Jesus.
His message is in the foot washing, and in the story of the foot washing.
His message was that we must become servants for others.
We must be humble in our hearts and in our actions.
Jesus is not asking us to be great.
That was never the point.

Foot washing is a simple act.
It involves only a basin of water and a towel.
It has no great liturgies attached to it.
One is not required to wear any special clothes or vestments.
There are no limits in terms of age, race, or sex.
This makes it not just the ultimate symbol of weakness, humility, and service; it is the ultimate symbol of the radical openness that Jesus had towards all.

Back to the story:
That night Jesus simply accepted all for who they were. Even Judas had his feet washed.
And Jesus sets the clear example that all deserve to be served.
All people, no matter their background, position, or status deserve to be treated with dignity and respect.

Foot washing can become a way of life – in the homes of people as well as in schools, work places, governments...
Just imagine...

Foot washing can influence and infuse all we do.
We can live the idea of “foot washing” in many creative, unusual, transforming, and gentle ways.
We do it for each other, and we serve each other and the whole world.

Service is the message we must give to each other and to the outside world.
And foot washing gives us a living symbol of that message.
It reminds us of what it means to be weak, to be humble, to understand that getting our way is less important than making sure that others are taken care of.

Foot washing is what Christianity is supposed to be about.
It's never about the things we say. It is about the things we do.
And Jesus is the Christ because of the things he did.

“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 should also do as I have done to you.”

I believe this is one of Jesus’ most powerful statements. It is often overlooked or ignored, but I believe it even rivals the Sermon on the Mount in terms of importance. It is important because of its simplicity. Jesus teaches by doing.

We need to be serving one another.
We need to stop thinking the way the world thinks.
We need to stop labelling and putting each other in categories.
The categories don’t matter, master or servant, rich or poor, black or white, Christian or Muslim, it doesn’t matter.

And last but not least:
The life of Jesus does not end in Jesus.
The life of Jesus lives on through us in the actions we perform for one another.
Jesus lives in our ability to be weak, humble, and serving!
Amen.