

## Not My Feet Only

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A Quick Review: in this series of sermons, we're exploring the New Testament contrast between the Kingdom of God, and what Jesus called "the kingdom of the world". The kingdom Jesus announced is, as he said to Pontius Pilate, "**not** from this world," because it operates differently from any kingdom or government of the world—past or present.

The kingdom of the world uses power or threat to enforce compliance, which, isn't necessarily bad. By contrast, the kingdom of God seeks to be faithful to the self-giving character of God, thereby revealing the most beautiful, dynamic, and transformative power in the universe.

The difference is between enforcing behavior and transforming the human heart. Jesus' disciples do great harm when they fail to preserve the difference.

In last week's text, Jesus' disciples quarreled over who would be greatest in the kingdom of heaven. That quarrel is reported in all three synoptic gospels—Twice in Luke! In Matthew 20, there's a unique twist: it is the mother of James and John who asks Jesus if her sons might occupy the seats of greatest honor in the kingdom. In Mark 10, it is James and John, themselves. But, in Mark 9, Luke 9, and again in Luke 22, the disciples quarrel.

And each time, Jesus responds with a lecture or a monologue.

I'm using two texts, this morning. In MATTHEW 18:1-5, the disciples don't quarrel; they simply ask, "Who is greatest in the kingdom?" It seems to be a very important question for the disciples, who were anticipating and preparing for a military coup and the establishment of a new political regime. While Jesus never confirmed or encouraged that expectation, he did fuel it with his inaugural address: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!"

In the text this morning, his lecture uses an object lesson. *"He called a little child, whom he put among them, <sup>3</sup>and said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. <sup>4</sup>Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. <sup>5</sup>Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. (MATTHEW 18:2-5 NRSV)*

What can a little child possibly teach us about greatness? Children in the ancient world had no rights, no position, or privileges of their own. They were at the "bottom of the pecking order," at the service of their parents, much like the household staff and domestic servants.

That's precisely Jesus' point. Jesus elevated a little child in the presence of his disciples by placing the child in a privileged position of honor at his side. It is customary, even today, to seat the guest of honor at the right side of the host. What can a child teach us?

- The lowly of heart. Remember the Beatitudes? "Blessed are the meek..." who instead of asserting their rights, willingly empty themselves and take the lowly position of a servant and child before God.
- The simple of heart ["Blessed are the pure in heart..."] who have not yet learned to be two-faced or deceitful—who know they belong to God - God is their father, mother, teacher, provider - they are content to recognize total dependence on God as the source of all goodness.

And a little child taught them all of that.

But, in today's text from John, there is no lecture.

<p>JOHN 13:4-17 (NRSV) <i>(Jesus) got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. <sup>5</sup>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. <sup>6</sup>He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" <sup>7</sup>Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." <sup>8</sup>Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." <sup>9</sup>Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" <sup>10</sup>Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are</i></p>	<p><i>clean, though not all of you." <sup>11</sup>For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean." <sup>12</sup>After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? <sup>13</sup>You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. <sup>14</sup>So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. <sup>15</sup>For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. <sup>16</sup>Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. <sup>17</sup>If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.</i></p>
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Don't you love Peter's response, "Not my feet only..."? That kind of total, spontaneous surrender. All in. There is no lecture here. This is not rhetorical. It's down-in-the-dirt, dirt-under-your-fingernails reality.

I remember seeing my cousins arguing bitterly over who was supposed to clean up a mess— spiteful arguments—ugly name-calling... and seeing Aunt Fay get up from her chair where she was resting after a long day of home making and mothering, walk over and get down on her knees and clean up the mess... and cousins lower their heads in shame and slink away to their rooms, hoping to go unnoticed.

This is how power is used in the kingdom of God. If you have all power in heaven and earth, use it to wash the feet of someone you know will deny you and betray you!

This is what the kingdom of God looks like. It looks like humility. It looks like grace. It looks like service. It looks like Jesus. And, aside from the cross, it is symbolized most graphically by a child and a towel.