

HEAVEN'S WELCOME MAT
Maundy Thursday Meditation
April 1, 2021
John 13:1-20; Philippians 2:1-8

December 15, 2008, the day after a press conference in Baghdad, when Iraqi journalist Muntadhar al-Zaidi threw his shoes at President George W. Bush, a BBC reporter noted: *"Hitting someone with a shoe is considered the supreme insult in the Arab world. In Arab and Islamic countries, footwear is viewed as ritually unclean: Even mentioning your shoes while insulting someone carries vile significance. So yesterday's loafer-launching aimed at President Bush really was the worst journalist Muntadar al-Zaidi could muster."* Some of you may remember seeing news clips of this; the President showed excellent reflexes, dodging both shoes at close range ... he was only twelve feet away. Al-Zaidi was then pulled to the floor by another journalist, before being grabbed by security guards and hustled out of the room. Then-White House spokeswoman Dana Perino was hit in the face by a microphone boom sent flying by a presidential bodyguard, resulting in a clearly visible black eye.

I'm told that even the word "Foot" or "Feet" is a word not used in polite society in the Middle East; the word "feet" is practically a four letter word (*figuratively speaking*) and you almost have to apologize for using it. Only vulgar and coarse people speak openly about feet, this lowliest part of the human body; it would be roughly similar to our referring to our "private parts" by their anatomical names. I mean, at least one of Dr. Suess' books would have been censored by Middle East Cancel Culture long before our lamentable Cancel Culture did so this year. It was a favorite of my children's, entitled The Foot Book. A selection: *"Left foot, right foot, left foot, right. Feet in the morning, feet at night. Wet foot, dry foot, high foot, low foot. Feet, feet, feet, how many feet you meet. Slow feet, quick feet, trick feet, sick feet. Up feet, down feet. Here comes clown feet. Small feet, big feet. Here comes pig feet! In the house and on the street. How many feet you meet."* Yes, I'm pretty sure that book wouldn't have sold well in the Middle East.

Did you know that In Middle Eastern societies, and throughout much of Asia, people rarely, if ever, cross their legs? Why? Because the soul of the shoe, the bottom of the foot, might show in someone's direction and thus insult them. In 1995, in negotiating the release of some U.S. soldiers after the first Gulf War, then-U.N. Ambassador Bill Richardson made the diplomatic faux pas of crossing his legs, exposing the bottom of his shoe in the direction of Saddam Hussein. He abruptly stood up and stormed out of the room; Ambassador Richardson had no idea why until some protocol advisors alerted him to the vulgar insult he had just directed toward the Iraqi dictator. Also after the first Gulf War, Saddam Hussein installed a mosaic of President George H.W. Bush on the floor of the Al-Rasheed Hotel in Baghdad; he delighted in releasing pictures of people, especially foreign dignitaries, stepping on Mr. Bush's face.

This is nothing new in the Middle East, it extends back millennia. For example, one of the nations which incurred God's wrath got the ultimate insult in the Psalms: *"Upon Edom, I will cast my shoe."* In the ancient Middle East, it was traditional to offer house guests a basin in which to wash their own feet before coming into the living areas of the home. Under Jewish law, the host could also order a servant to wash a guest's feet ... as long as the servant was not Hebrew. It was considered so menial, so debasing, so ... yucky unclean, that only the lowliest servants would do it.

Well, that's the cultural context our reading from John's Gospel. We just read how Jesus was going to show His disciples the "full extent of His love." Note that Judas was present. He did not leave until later; John wants us to know that. John tells us, *"Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under His power, and that He had come from God and was returning to God, so He 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 wrapped around Him."* Much to the shock and consternation of the disciples, Jesus assumed the dress and the role of the lowliest servant and began washing their ... feet!

John continues, verse 6: *"He came to Simon Peter, who said to Him, 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet?' (Peter's accented emphasis was probably not on the word "my", but on the word "feet"). Jesus replied, 'You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand.' 'No,' said Peter, 'You shall never wash my feet.' Jesus answered,*

'Unless I wash you, you have no part with Me.' 'Then, Lord,' Simon Peter replied, 'not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!'" Peter may not have understood fully what Jesus was talking about, but note: he was certain that he wanted nothing to part him from Jesus! So he responds in so many words, "If that's what it takes to be with You, then wash me all over!" Jesus answered, "A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean."

Peter would later come to understand that Jesus was acting out something of a parable, an object lesson. This was about the Savior humbly and selflessly doing what it takes to be about washing away and cleansing His people of sin. Yes, we come to the "household" of God in repentance and faith and we are totally forgiven in Christ, washed all over, bathed in His blood, if you will, which is what we symbolize in Baptism. Yet, we still continue to sin. We do get our "feet" dirty. Feet are symbolic of our creatureliness; feet are the symbolic point of contact with the world. We are still part of this world, and as part of this fallen world our human nature still is prone to sin. Now, we don't have to be re-baptized each and every time we sin. We don't need to be washed all over again; there is one baptism. But we still need to have our "feet" washed time and again.

In this acting parable, we have the Gospel in a nutshell! As spelled out in our reading from Philippians, Jesus knew He was equal with God, that all things were His, and yet He rose from His table in Glory, laid aside His *heavenly* robes, clothed Himself with a human nature, took upon Himself the form of a lowly servant, the lowliest of servants, and through His sacrificial, self-giving act He both prepared a "once and for all" bath with which to cleanse His people from their sin and provided a means to continually cleanse and prepare them to come into the household and presence of God.

What is our modern day equivalent to the servant who washes feet as people enter the household? It is the DOORMAT ... we wipe our feet on the doormat before entering the home. Think on this: Each time we willingly engage in sinful behavior, we are, in effect, wiping our feet on Jesus Christ, treating Him as our doormat, giving Him the insult Saddam Hussein loved to deliver to Mr. Bush by that mosaic on the floor of the Al-Rasheed Hotel. We are giving our Lord the ultimate Middle Eastern insult by, in effect, showing Him the bottom of our feet. In this passage Jesus refers to the disciple who *lifts his heel* against Him, the one who purposely exposes the sole of his foot in ultimate insult to his Lord. By deliberate sin, we, too, "lift our heel" against our Lord, we wipe our feet on Jesus. That should *bother* us. It should break our hearts.

Theologically speaking, Jesus *laid down* His life at the entrance of His Father's house. But note: The **Doormat at the threshold to the household of God is also a Welcome Mat**. The master servant Jesus Christ stands at the doorway of the heavenly household to wash the feet of those who enter the household of His father, and sit at His table. Our sins must be washed away before we come into the household of our Lord, and our "feet" must be cleaned again and again before coming to dinner at the family Table.

One final point, a sermon in itself but I'll be brief: *"When He had finished washing their feet, He put on His clothes and returned to His place. 'Do you understand what I have done for you?' He asked them. 'You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than His master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.'"*

Jesus calls us, His disciples, to be "doormats" as well. No, it's not that He is calling us to be timid mediocrities allowing people to walk all over us while we turn the other cheek and say *"God bless you"* as we are stomped on. But He does call us to do whatever it takes to enable others to enter the household and presence of God! Out of grateful appreciation of what He has done for us, we are to wash each other's feet. Even the feet of those who might betray us. No matter how people might disappoint us, no matter how people may insult, injure us or hurt us, we are called to serve them ... with the greater goal in mind of helping them enter the household of God and come to the Family table.

And we will be blessed if we do so ... that's a promise from our Lord.