

What would be your last words? If you only had a little time left, how would you use those final breaths? Is there some wisdom you'd impart? Would you call the next generation to your side and share with them the secret of life? Maybe you'd just pull your friends and family close and tell them you love them. Just what is it you'd want to say?

Well, tonight is Jesus' last night before His death. He knows time is running out. Right now, Jesus is a dead man walking. And how does He choose to spend these final precious moments? With His closest friends, His twelve disciples. He makes a reservation at the Upper Room, to share one last meal with them. He could be anywhere else, do anything else, but this is what He wants.

And in these final, fleeting moments with them before His arrest, what are His last words to them? Interestingly, tonight Jesus' final message isn't put into words, as much as it is put into action. As I've read in hospice brochures, for those who are dying, it's not so much about words as it is gestures. For those who are moving on, making the last leg of life's journey, it's more about the little touches, the gentle squeezes, the gestures. And so in addition to laying aside His pride tonight, Jesus also lays aside words.

Once we get to the table in John's Gospel tonight, Jesus makes some of His most haunting gestures in silence: "during supper," John says, "Jesus . . . got up . . . took off . . . tied a towel . . . poured water . . . began to wash . . . and to wipe." You can see every move in your mind—not a word is spoken; it's all in action. "And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going to God, 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." It's like St. Francis of Assisi once famously said, "Preach the Gospel at all times, and when necessary use words." Right now, actions speak louder than words. After all, this is the One who John earlier calls the Word made flesh, the Word incarnate, the Word embodied.

And what is that Word-in-action saying? For people in the ancient Near East, they would've heard Jesus loud and clear. What He was doing was nothing short of radical. For us twenty-first century Americans—usually wearing socks and shoes, staying indoors much of the time, and bathing often—this whole foot-washing thing can too easily fall flat. But for these disciples, when Jesus ties that towel around His waist and fills the basin, for them this would've been completely shocking.

You see, for them, feet are literally the lowest, earthiest part of the body. And at the time, they didn't drive cars nor did they have paved roads. They lived in the desert and walked everywhere. And their choice of footwear was open sandals. Everyone knew just how dirty and dusty, caked and cracked, feet could get.

Remember back in '08, when that Iraqi journalist threw his shoes at President George W. Bush during a press conference? In Arabic, he yelled, "This is a farewell kiss from the Iraqi people, you dog," as he threw his first shoe. Then, throwing the second shoe, he said, "This is for the widows and orphans and all those killed in Iraq." President Bush had to duck twice to avoid getting hit. For us Americans watching at home, it was a strange gesture—we were left scratching our heads. But even with all the cultural advancements and modern conveniences, shoes still stand out as filthy and offensive in the Arab world.

So for Jesus to deal with matters of the feet would've really said something. But not only that—not only was Jesus willing to get down and dirty—but Jesus was also acting as a slave. It was a normal act of hospitality for the host to provide a washing of feet for his guests, especially before a meal—after all, who wants dirt tracked into their house? But, of course, it was never the host who would do it. In fact, it wasn't just any slave who did it either—but in the hierarchy of slaves serving in a household, it would be the lowest of the low who would perform the duty. If you didn't know where you stood on the social ladder, being the guy who washed feet would be a pretty good indicator. Well, think about that—here's the Lord God Almighty, the one to whom every knee shall bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and He's stooping down to wash stinky, dirty, nasty feet.

Now, this is certainly a touching gesture, a loving display. It's nice to see the pope kneel to wash the feet of a young priest on Maundy Thursday at the Vatican. But when Jesus arrives at the feet of Judas, maybe like me, you also react with revulsion. That's right—with all that was going on just now at the table, I almost forgot! There, along with rest of the twelve, was Judas—the guy who, in only a matter of minutes, will get up and betray Jesus with a kiss, sending Him to His doom. Imagine serving the likes of him, knowing full-well what He is about to do to you.

But I guess it's good that Jesus didn't draw the line with Judas. I mean, just consider what else comes next. Judas won't be the only bad-guy in this story. Peter, Jesus' top disciple, will deny Him three times. And the other ten of them will also abandon Him after His arrest. We're told that John was the only one who stood by Him at the cross. With friends like these, who needs enemies? Had Jesus drawn the line with Judas, where else should He have drawn the line? "Surely, not I, Lord?" they each assumed. But Jesus could've easily said, "Yes you. All of you."

You know where Leonardo da Vinci painted his famous *Last Supper*? On the wall of Santa Maria delle Grazie. It was where the monks took their meals. They were forced to look up at it, and connect their monastic table with that of Jesus and His betrayers. Tonight, our Lord does the same. He hosts the likes of us—men and women, so-called disciples—who betray Him in our own ways. And he washes our feet, even though He knows you and I will walk out of this place, running away from His commands and kicking aside His teachings with those same feet.

Good thing this foot-washing gesture is also a symbol for something greater, for what Jesus is about to do. Kneeling in deep humility as a slave, washing feet, reminds us that Jesus, "though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." It was to wash the dirt of our sins away by becoming a slave to the cross that Jesus came in the first place. What we see tonight won't shock us nearly as much as what we'll witness tomorrow night.

But maybe what should shock us most is Jesus' command to do likewise. That He would dare invite sinners like these twelve men, sinners like you and I, to do as He does. Soon, He'll be leaving us—not just in death—but after His rises again, He'll be gone for good. But before He ascends into heaven, He risks asking us to carry on His divine mission of love for Him. He goes out on a limb and commissions us to play Savior to the world, to lay down ourselves for one another. "Love one another," He says, "and the whole world will know to whom you belong." It's a simple command, but the hardest one to do. And if we do it, *all* Ten Commandments are kept—if we don't, none of them are. It's love makes all the difference.

In her book, *On Children and Death*, Madge Harrah writes about the difference love made for her. One day, she received a phone call that changed her life. Madge was in shock to learn that her brother, his wife, her sister, and both the sister's children all died in a terrible car accident. Her mother begged her to come as soon as she could.

Not only did this news leave Madge in a fog, but she and her family were in the middle of a move at the time, with all their things packed up—including their funeral attire. The house looked like she felt inside: a mess. As others heard the devastating news, many reached out to help—"If there's anything I can do . . ." they'd say. But Madge couldn't think, so she didn't know what favors to ask for. She was exhausted, her body dragged, all she could do was sit for a moment . . . when the doorbell rang.

Opening the door, there stood Emerson King—the husband of one of the Sunday School teachers at church. "I've come to clean your shoes," he said. Confused, Madge asked him to repeat. "I remember when my father died," he said, "it took me hours to get the children's shoes cleaned and shined for the funeral. So that's what I've come to do for you." *Huh*, she said to herself. *I hadn't even thought about shoes*. Then, she remembered—last Sunday, her son had waded through the mud in his church shoes. And her daughter had kicked rocks, scuffing the toes of her shoes. They'd been tossed into the laundry room to be cleaned later—but who knows when they'd get done.

Emerson got out some newspapers and spread them on the floor. Madge brought him the shoes. Then, he continued by getting out a pan and filling it with soapy water. He next got out an old knife and retrieved a sponge. Madge's husband

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found the shoe polish. As she watched Emerson settle himself on the floor and get to work—concentrating intently on one task—it helped her to pull her thoughts together. *Laundry first, Madge told herself. Next, the children need a bath.*

As Emerson continued to work, saying nothing, she writes, I thought of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples. Our Lord had knelt, serving his friends, even as this man now knelt serving us. The love in the act released my tears at last, healing rain to wash the fog from my mind. I could move. I could think. I could get on with the business of living. . . . Ahead lay grim, sad days, but the comfort of Christ's presence, symbolized by the image of a quiet man kneeling on my kitchen floor with a pan of water, would sustain me.

Now, whenever I hear of an acquaintance [who's] lost a loved one, I no longer call with the vague offer, "If there's anything I can do . . ." Instead I try to think of one specific task that suits that person's need—. . . washing the family car, taking the dog to the . . . kennel, or house-sitting during the funeral. And if that person says to me, "How did you know I needed that done?" I reply, "It's because a man once cleaned my shoes."

After tonight, that's the reason you and I can give—"it's because a man once cleaned my shoes."