

“You will never wash my feet.” Those are the words of Peter, but they could be the words of many of us here. The whole foot washing thing makes us very uncomfortable. In John’s gospel, Jesus does not tell us to eat his bread- body and drink his wine-blood as a sign of the New Covenant. Instead he tells us, “if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet.” Imagine how it would be if instead of politely eating wafers and sipping wine on Sunday mornings we all got down on our knees and washed each other’s feet.

Probably we wouldn’t mind the washing so much as the being washed. Like Peter we want to shout, “You will never wash my feet.” I’m not sure what it is about feet, or specifically about my feet and having them washed by someone else.

Our feet are what give us independence. Without feet we cannot easily walk, we cannot get around on our own. Without feet we need help. Our feet are what connect us to the earth but they are also very vulnerable. That’s why we protect them with leather and with rubber.

And Jesus asks us to take away that protection. Jesus asks us to be vulnerable. "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me."

Researcher and writer Brené Brown became an overnight sensation with her TED talk on "The Power of Vulnerability." It is now one of the top five most viewed TED talks, with over 30 million views, and she has become a best-selling author. Brown spent the first five years of her research focusing on shame and empathy, and is now using that work to explore a concept that she calls Wholeheartedness.

She asks: How do we learn to embrace our vulnerabilities and imperfections so that we can engage in our lives from a place of authenticity and worthiness? How do we cultivate the courage,

compassion, and connection that we need to recognize that we are enough – that we are worthy of love, belonging, and joy?

I think that is what Jesus is doing here. He is showing the disciples that even though they have dirty, gnarly, easily hurt feet that they are totally beloved. God loves us enough to kneel down in front of us and wash our feet. God is willing to see our vulnerabilities and imperfections and love us. Not despite our imperfections, but with them. God sees us exactly as we are and God says, “Come here, let me wash your feet.”

Will we, to quote Brown, “embrace our vulnerabilities and imperfections so that we can engage in our lives from a place of authenticity and worthiness?” Or will we say with Peter “You will never wash my feet?”

To be fair to Peter, once he realizes that Jesus is serious, once he realizes that only his vulnerability, his willingness to put himself unreservedly into God’s hands will bind him to Christ forever, he declares, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" Why stop with my feet? wash all of me! In that moment, I think, Peter experienced what Brown calls wholeheartedness, the courage, compassion, and connection that he needed to recognize that he was enough – that he was worthy of love, belonging, and joy.

In washing the disciples feet, Jesus was saying, “You are enough, you are worthy of my love, you are worthy to belong to me, you are worthy to enter into my joy.” As they allowed their feet to be washed by the Christ, by the one who was about to carry the pain of the world in his own body, they were allowing their vulnerability to carry them into the new reign, the reign of God where God kneels down and washes our feet, not because we are more important than God but because God’s love is gentle and humble and vulnerable and whole-hearted.

And because God loves humans. God loves us with our physical bodies. I have heard it said that we are spiritual beings having a physical experience. That separates body and spirit in a way that Jesus would not have understood. Our spirits form our bodies but just as much, our experience in our bodies forms our spirit. Our sacraments include our bodies – the water of baptism, the communion meal, the anointing for healing – to be human is to have a body.

And as we age, our bodies require more and more attention. Things we once took for granted become challenging and we have to spend time and attention looking after our physical selves. God loves our feet, young feet, old feet, middle-aged feet, damaged feet, so too God loves every part of our bodies, every part of our hearts and minds. God loves our humanness.

So who are we to push our bodies away, “No God, You will never wash my feet.” God longs to tenderly and gently wash every crevice, every blemish. God longs to sing gently to you as she washes, “You are enough, you are worthy of my love, you are worthy to belong to me, you are worthy to enter into my joy.” “Unless I wash you,” she says, “you have no share with me.”

I am going to finish with a poem by Janet Morley, the Bodies of Grown-ups

*The bodies of grownups
come with stretchmarks and scars,
faces that have been lived in,
relaxed breasts and bellies,
backs that give trouble,
and well-worn feet:
flesh that is particular,
and obviously mortal.*

*They also come
with bruises on their hearts,
wounds they can't forget,
and each of them
a company of lovers in their soul
who will not return
and cannot be erased.
And yet I think there is a flood of beauty
beyond the smoothness of youth;
and my heart aches for that grace of longing
that flows through bodies
no longer straining to be innocent,
but yearning for redemption.*