

SERMON TITLE: "Living Water: Washing Water"
SERMON TEXT: John 13:1-20
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: September 5, 2021, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Well, we've come to the final sermon in this series on Living Water stories in the Gospel of John. And I have to say that each of these seven weeks has been full of real-life water events. Drought, fires, and smoke have been the main lack-of-water story out here in the west, but southern Utah has suffered from flash flooding when the rains have come in torrents. And repeatedly, we've seen news stories of downpours and flooding in the southeastern and northeastern states. This week, Hurricane Ida unleashed horrific damage from water—all the way from Louisiana to New York City. And, yet, ironically, what do those waterlogged people need even more than electricity, gasoline, and telephone service? They need clean water. While water can take life in a flash, it's also what allows us to live.

Over the past weeks, as we've made our way through the earlier chapters of John's gospel, we've talked about this living water as transforming water, birthing water, gushing water, walking water, flowing water, and weeping water. Today, John chapter 13 brings us to the story of Jesus' Last Supper with his disciples. Before they ate, Jesus performed a great service to them. Let's think about what was said and done there, and see what we can learn from washing water.

1—WASHING WATER IS FOR OUR PHYSICAL BODIES

In this living water story, just like in all the other ones we've read from John's gospel, everything begins with the earthy realities of human existence. In John 13, the first thing we see is that washing water is for our physical bodies. While there are spiritual implications that we'll get to later, it all begins with a pitcher of water, a basin, a towel, and dirty human feet. In those days, some 2000 years ago, there weren't such things as toenail clippers, foot files, and pedicures. So I imagine the disciples' feet being thick with rough callouses, maybe cracked and sore from dryness, and certainly tired from so much walking. I imagine

long, jagged toenails and possible corns and bunions. Maybe there were some funguses and unpleasant odor—although that was probably less than today, due to the fact that they wore sandals and not sneakers. But, at this first stage of the story, there's no mystery what the problem is or what the solution could be. This story is about plain, ordinary washing water that cleans real-life, dirty human feet. Just in case anyone would have any doubt, Jesus gave us the example. Washing water is for our physical bodies.

It occurs to me that this story about washing water isn't a miracle story in the way we usually think of miracle stories. Jesus didn't do anything all that uniquely divine with his basin and towel. In fact, he told his disciples that, from now on, they should do the very same thing he did.

But it's possible that washing water alone might not be enough to solve every problem of the human body. My son is now 23 years old. When he was a teenager, he developed a pretty foul foot odor. It was embarrassing for him and painful for us parents. He tried all the usual home remedies like taking regular showers, changing his socks often, buying some new shoes, and applying over-the-counter athlete's foot medicine. None of that fixed the problem. So Steve finally took our son to a doctor, who prescribed some kind of medication. Within a few days, the odor was gone, and we were all much relieved. To the doctor, it was a simple cure. But to our family, it was like a miracle.

And, sometimes, we might need to acquire that kind of professional help for our own bodies—or suggest such help to someone else. Washing water is for our physical bodies.

2—WASHING WATER IS FOR OUR SPIRITUAL HEALTH

While getting clean can certainly improve the well-being of our physical bodies, washing water is also for our spiritual health. That's why washing water is a part of so many sacred rituals. We all know that's the basic idea behind Christian baptism—to wash us clean of sin. In biblical times, Jews also used water for purification of their bodies and spirits. Remember those six jars of water that Jesus turned into wine in John chapter two? Those jars were meant to hold water for Jewish purification rituals.

When I was getting my Master of Divinity degree at the Iliff School of Theology in the late 1980s, one of our required courses was about the acts and rituals of worship. Our professor invited in a Catholic priest one day to tell us about Catholic worship. The priest told us that, in any Catholic mass, the priest always washes his hands in a basin of water during the sacramental ritual of Holy Communion. This practice didn't originate because of human germs passed by lots of handshaking before the worship service. No one would have even thought of that, hundreds of years before, when the handwashing became part of the ritual of the mass. No, the reason for the priestly handwashing was because, in the order of the mass, the offering came before the bread was broken. And, hundreds of years ago, the offering wasn't just money in an offering plate. The offering was when people would bring in their chickens and other small livestock to hand over to the priest. There were feathers and chicken poop that needed to be cleaned off the priest's hands before he handled the sacred body and blood of Christ. That inclusion of washing in the ritual of the mass was obviously about physical cleanliness, but the washing water was also for the spiritual health of the worshipers, as they respected and worshiped Christ in that sacred act of Holy Communion.

I'm mindful too of the Muslim practice of washing before prayers. I don't know how much Muslims are able to do the washings throughout the five prayers of every day when they're at work and school. But I know that when they go to their mosques for Friday worship, the men all go into the men's washroom where they have a big long trough sink. The men wash their hands, their arms, and their faces. And they take off their shoes and socks and wash their feet—all before they enter into their sanctuary for worship. You know how Muslim men then kneel down on the floor for sitting and bowing in prayer. If you've ever visited a mosque or when you've seen videos of their prayer services, you've seen that the men crowd in close together, so one man's nose is very near another man's rear end and feet. I'm sure the washing helps to make that sacred experience more pure and holy and spiritual than it might otherwise be. The Muslim

ritual of washing involves washing each part three times, and those three times help the worshiper to remember that he worships God physically, mentally, and spiritually.

Similarly, when Jesus washed his disciples' feet, he was helping them prepare for a time of important spiritual teaching and deep prayer. Jesus didn't want his disciples to be distracted by uncomfortable or smelly feet. He wanted them to be able to focus their minds, hearts, and spirits on God. That's why washing water was and is for our spiritual health.

3—WASHING WATER IS FOR SERVICE TO OTHERS

So, washing water is for physical bodies and for spiritual health. But there's one more thing Jesus had in mind in this living water story. Jesus wanted his disciples to understand that washing water is for service to others. Yes, it would help their own bodies to be washed. Yes, it would help make the sacred space more holy and spiritual for everyone. But, in addition to those important functions, washing water was also an opportunity for Jesus' disciples to bow down and provide care for others, just like a slave or servant would provide such a service.

Jesus, the master and teacher of this group, wanted his disciples to see the importance of humbly caring for others. Jesus was obviously their leader and the one with the most power. If there was no servant available, Jesus could have ordered one of the other disciples to do this lowly work. Or, he could have just tried to overlook the problem and pretend that the disciples could all just ignore their discomforts. But that wasn't Jesus' style to ignore people and their problems.

Did you notice that little conversation between Jesus and Peter in verse eight? Peter protested that Jesus shouldn't wash his feet. But Jesus replied that Peter had to allow it, or Peter had "no share with" Jesus. Those are some strong words. Some might even call them harsh. But in matters of love, Jesus didn't back down or back away. Peter and the other disciples needed this care that Jesus was willing to provide. So, Jesus—with a towel wrapped around his waist—took to doing this menial job that none of them wanted to do. By his example of love, Jesus showed his disciples and us that washing water is for service to others.

CONCLUSION

Since tomorrow is Labor Day, I'll tell you about an article I read that talked about jobs. Somebody, somewhere, sometime had gone to the trouble to analyze in minute detail what kind of skills are most needed for a large variety of occupations. Not only were they then able to see what careers required similar skills, but they were also able to determine what careers would use the most opposite skill sets. For example, an aerospace engineer uses a completely different set of skills than a model. And an elementary-to-high-school teacher uses opposite skills from someone who analyzes agricultural commodities.

Obviously, I was curious about my occupation's opposite job. Who would use a completely different set of skills than a clergyperson? The answer, according to that article, was car washers. While clergy have to be versed in theology and philosophy and have clarity of speech and social perceptiveness, car washers have to be able to reach with their arms, operate machinery, and have cross body coordination and depth perception.*

While the day-to-day mental and physical activities of the jobs might be quite different, however, I suspect that clergy and car washers intersect in one important area. We both have an interest in cleanliness. As today's scripture reading made clear, we both have some engagement with washing water.

Of course, this story in John 13 isn't told just for professional clergy. All Christian believers are called to this job of serving others by caring for the physical body and our collective spiritual health. We can't just pretend that no one needs our attention and care. It's not right to ignore problems. Washing water tells us that we all should be in the business of setting aside our own egos and self-interests to humbly serve others. We may not always do it perfectly, but we at least have to be willing to try. This is how water gives us life. This is the message of washing water.

* https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/08/08/upshot/what-is-your-opposite-job.html?campaign_id+9&emc=edit_nn_20210728&instance_id=36411&nl=the-morning®i_id=97788017&segment_id=64604&te=1&user_id=f38d13065d43cab57899115af5a1fa42d3