

# BELPRES CHURCH

## Sermon Title: Kneeling God?

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**Scripture:** John 13:1-17

<sup>1</sup>It was just before the Passover Festival. Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

<sup>2</sup>The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already prompted Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus.

<sup>3</sup>Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God;

<sup>4</sup>so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist.

<sup>5</sup>After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped 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 replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand."

<sup>8</sup>"No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet."

Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me."

<sup>9</sup>"Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!"

<sup>10</sup>Jesus answered, "Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you."

<sup>11</sup>For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean.

<sup>12</sup>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.

<sup>13</sup>"You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am.

<sup>14</sup>Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet.

<sup>15</sup>I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.

<sup>16</sup>Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him.

<sup>17</sup>Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

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**Transcript:**

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The scripture comes from John chapter 13. But let me pray. So, Lord, as we turn to your word, pray that you would please help us understand it and live in light of it. In your name. Amen. So the text says this, "It was just before the Passover festival, Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he showed them the full extent of his love. The evening meal was in progress and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot to betray Jesus. Jesus knew that the father had put all things into his hands and that he had come from God and was returning to God. So he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, 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 that was wrapped around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet?'

"Jesus replied, 'You do not realize now what I am doing but later you will understand.' 'No Lord,' said Peter, 'you shall never wash my feet.' Jesus answered, 'Unless I wash you, you have no part of me. Do you understand what I've 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. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.'" So back when I was doing college ministry, I led a Bible study of fraternity guys, and one day we were studying this story where Jesus washes his disciples' feet. And I said, "If you've been around churches a lot, you've probably heard this story a lot and it's familiar and so we lose how shocking and awkward and weird this would have been back then as now for Jesus to wash his disciples' feet. So to recapture some of that original awkwardness, I want you all to take off your shoes and socks, I am going to now wash your feet."

They were horrified. Their faces were like, "No, no, no. We get the point." Because it just sounded so awkward and touchy-feely like an Oprah interview or something like that. And they're like, "No, no, no." So I said, "Relax. I'm not going to wash your feet. I'm just trying to make a point." But I've always felt that, that was a bit of a failure of nerve on my part and that it actually would have made a bigger impression had I actually gone through with washing their feet. And I don't want to repeat that mistake. So take off your shoes and socks. Oh yeah, game on. We're doing this. Some of you are like, "He's joking, right? Dear God, tell me he's joking." And those of you online are like, "Sweet. I am so glad I'm online today. So glad I'm not in the room for this one." I am joking, but I'm trying to make a point. For Jesus to wash his disciples' feet was just as awkward and uncomfortable then as it is today.

It was very socially inappropriate because back then people walked everywhere and they did it in sandals. And so they got dusty and dirty and they smelled bad, toe jam. I mean, it was just gross. And so often at a dinner party, a host would put out a bucket of water for people to wash their own feet in. Sometimes maybe they would make a slave do it, but it was also considered so disgusting and gross that in some provinces it was illegal to make even a slave wash someone's feet. So it was definitely inappropriate for a person of higher rank like Jesus, who was a teacher, to wash the feet of people of a lower rank, his disciples. But Jesus is making a point about how much God loves us. And his love is no frail thing. His love gives us courage and power to serve and love others in a way that heals our world.

Now, right before this, the setting for this, this is the night before Jesus is going to be crucified, and right before this, the disciples got in a big old fight about who was going to be greatest in the kingdom of God. Because see, they thought that Jesus was about to drive out the Roman oppressors and establish a Jewish state. So they were arguing about who's going to get the bigger office. One of them might've said something like, "Well, when that happens, I'm going to

be Secretary of State." And another guy goes, "No, no, no, no, no, no, no. You're not worthy of Secretary of State. Secretary of the Interior, that's the best you should get. I should be Secretary of State." So by washing their feet, Jesus is actually rebuking them for their childish bickering and he's demonstrating a different power. Where he pulls off the greatest victory in history, not by conquering, but by allowing himself to die on a cross to pay the price for our sins, being raised from the dead, which launched a movement that changed the world.

And a lot of sermons on this text, they move pretty quickly too. "This is Jesus. This is an example of how we are to love and serve other people the way Jesus has served us." And that's true. At the end, Jesus says, "You should serve as I have served." But if we move too quickly to that application points, we miss the bigger point, the more important point, that this is not just a story about how we should love and serve others. It is fundamentally, first and foremost, a story about how we have been loved and served by the God who comes to us in Jesus. So I'm going to spend most of this sermon talking about how we are loved and served by God rather than how we should go serve other people because I just think we need that right now. We are in a season of suckage. The pandemic doesn't seem to end and everyone's mad at everyone. It's just a season of suckage and we need to hear how much God loves us because God's love gives us power and courage and hope.

The text says, "Having loved his own who were in the world, he showed them the full extent of his love." That's how it begins. This is first and foremost a story about the full extent of God's love for us, and it shows us that God loves us when we are unlovable. The text says, "The evening meal was in progress and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot to betray Jesus." And we find out in just a few verses that Jesus knows that Judas is about to sell him out to the religious leaders who are going to have him crucified. We also find out he knows that Peter in just a few hours is going to deny even knowing Jesus to save his own skin. And yet Jesus washes Judas' feet. He washes Peter's feet. He washes Thomas' feet, who's going to doubt the resurrection. His disciples right now are fighting and jockeying for position and prestige and power. They are being really irritating people right now, but Jesus loves and serves them anyway.

And all of us are unlovable at least some times. My wife keeps saying this phrase to me over and over again. She says, "Remember, Scott, because of COVID, nobody is being their best self right now." Sometimes I wonder if there's a subtle, "And that means you too, Scott," just by the timing sometimes when it comes up. Just may be a subtle message there. So we were talking about this on staff this week and one woman said, "I'm beginning to worry that this is my best self, like this is as good as it gets, man." Jesus loves you not just when you are your best self, he loves you there too, Jesus loves you when you are your worst self. Second, Jesus serves us even though he's the one that should be served. The text is very detailed in its description. It sounds like an eyewitness account, and it says, "Jesus got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, wrapped a towel around his waist, and began to wash his disciples' feet."

And there's symbolism here, because Jesus is fully God who took off his outer garment of being God and came down to earth in the person of Jesus to love us and to serve us and to show us how much he loves us. And as I said, in this culture, it was considered undignified for someone of a higher rank to wash the feet of someone of a lower rank. But Jesus, the one who should be served, he's God after all, is the one who serves. It's beyond humble. It's humiliation. And, again, it's symbolic because, the next day, Jesus is going to be crucified and crucifixion was one of the most humiliating ways to die that there is. The Romans crucified people naked, and people would walk by and throw things at them and spit on them

as they slowly died on a cross. Jesus wasn't just humble. He was willing to be undignified, willing to be humiliated, to show how much he loves you and me.

And you can search all of human history and all of human philosophy and religion and you will find gods who demand to be served, demand homage, demand submission, but you will never find a God who kneels. Except the one revealed in Jesus, the true God, the real God. Yes, you can applaud that line. That's true. It's good news. Only the real God who comes to us in Jesus kneels. He loves us even when we're unlovable. He serves even though he should be served. And finally Jesus loves us, he loves you, he loves me even in the most disgusting parts of ourselves. Now, he loves you in all the good things you do too. He loves you for all the good things you do too, but we'll never experience the depth of Jesus' love, never get the power his love gives us until we let him into the dirtiest, most disgusting parts of our lives.

The text says, "Jesus came to Simon Peter who said to him, 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet? No, Lord, you shall never wash my feet.'" Just parenthetically, no, Lord, not a good statement. Bit of a contradiction in terms. No, Lord. And it's possible that Peter's emphasis here might have been, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet? It should be the other way around, Jesus." But his emphasis might also have been, "Are you going to wash my feet? See, my feet are disgusting. I don't want you to see my feet. They stink. They're gross." That's why washing feet is weird. We get this. If I were to ask one of my kids to give me a back rub, they wouldn't do it. But maybe, they might. There's a chance. But if I were to ask them to rub my bare feet, it's just cringy, isn't it? Gross. Ick. No. Peter says, "Not my feet. I'm embarrassed about my feet. Here, Jesus, wash my hands. They look better."

That's so us, right? "Here's the good stuff. Here's the good stuff. Look at this, look at the clean parts." But Jesus loves us even at the dirtiest parts of ourselves. The places we hide not just from him, we hide them from ourselves, and live in denial about them or justify them or rationalize them. Sometimes we'll admit our socially acceptable sins. "I just work too much." Oh, far out. You're breaking the fourth commandment. Shut up, dude. But rarely, rarely will we let anyone see the really dirty parts. And when I say the dirty parts, probably the first thing that comes to mind is all the sexual sins, And yeah, sure, that too, pornography, lust, God wants to clean all that up. But also the ones we maybe don't even notice, our unforgiving heart, our indifference to the suffering of others, the judgments we make against other people because of how they're dressed or their age or their race or their education level. Sometimes we don't even think those things are sin. Sometimes we even think they're good.

But in this text, Jesus says, "Unless I wash you, you have no part of me." In other words, "Unless you let me into those dark pots, you will never have a real powerful, strong relationship with me." So what's the thing that you are most ashamed of? What's the thing in your life that you think is the most ugly? When we let him into the dirtiest places of ourselves, we experience his love in a whole new way. Not guilt. Not condemnation. The point is not to feel guilty. The point is not to feel guilty. The point is to feel fully known, the good and the gross, and still fully loved. And unless we let him in to those dirtiest parts of our lives, we'll have an intellectual relationship with him, we'll have a theological relationship with him, but we'll never have a real powerful life-changing relationship with him. One of the reasons we don't experience God isn't because he's too far away. It's because he comes to uncomfortably close. One of the reasons we don't experience God is not because he's too far away. It is because he comes to uncomfortably close.

Someone just said, "I'm stepping on toes." Yes, and I'm trying to wash them at the same time. The thing that makes foot washing feels so awkward is it is so strangely intimate because it's

not what we want people to see. And we say we want to experience God's presence. No, we don't. No, we don't. Not if it means admitting the ugliest parts of ourselves that we live in denial about or justify. So we prefer to keep God far off. Intellectual idea, theological idea, otherwise, I'm going to have to admit that my feet stink. But they do. But they do. And of all people, Christians should be the one, we should be the most able to freely admit all of the ugly parts of our lives and sin because we know that because Jesus died on the cross to pay the price for our sins, we know that, as the Bible says, "There is now therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." This is not about feeling guilty.

It's about feeling fully known and fully loved in spite of all the mess, and that sets you free from shame and guilt because someone's seen the worst of me and I'm still loved. And when you get that, there's power in that and it empowers you and powers you to be bold and to be brave and to serve others the way Jesus has served us. Because, ultimately, this is also a text about how we are supposed to serve other people. Jesus says, "Now that I your Lord and teacher have washed your feet you also should wash one another's feet." But he says that at the end of the story, not at the beginning. He says, "First, you've got to let me into the ugliest parts of your life and let me do some work there, and when you experience me loving you that way you are, you are going to serve. You're going to serve other people."

And without that power, we will burn out on serving, we will get bitter and resentful about serving. That's why I think the most important verse in this whole story might be verse three where it says, "Jesus knew that he had come from God and was returning to God so he began to wash his disciples' feet." The "so" is really important. The reason Jesus is willing to look undignified to serve his disciples is because he knows who's he is. He knows he is loved by the father, and so he has perfect self-esteem. He doesn't need the approval of anyone else. He's loved by the father. That's his security, which is why him stooping to serve right here is not weakness. It's incredibly strong. Who's stronger in this story? Jesus, who is so secure in himself that he doesn't mind washing people's feet, or the disciples who are bickering and arguing about prestige and power like a bunch of toddlers fighting over a toy?

Jesus says, "Let the security of experiencing my love empower you to serve others in ways that change the world and fulfill you and give you joy," which is why the very last thing he says is, "Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them." Blessed, we are blessed when we serve. The more we serve others, the more joy, the more power, the more exciting growing our lives will be, our families will be, our church will be, our nation will be. We were designed to make a difference, and if we are not doing that, we will be unfulfilled because we are working against our design. Jesus says, "You'll be blessed if you do these things." Not think about these things, not hear sermons about these things. The blessing is not in the sermon. The blessing is never in the sermon. The blessing is in the doing. But not out of guilt, out of an experience of God's love.

So here's your homework for this week. Homework for this week, in addition to doing the big four that we always do to stay connected to God, prayer, worship, scripture, community, in addition to that, every time you pray this week, picture Jesus washing your feet. Every time you pray this week, picture Jesus washing your feet. So I've been doing this all week in preparation of this sermon, I've been doing this all week and I have to admit it's a little weird and it feels a little awkward and something feels not quite right about it, but here it is in scripture. And I also have to say that doing it, it does connect me to Jesus in a different way. So that's your homework. After college, I worked for a year as an intern at University Presbyterian Church in Seattle. And one day, one of the administrative assistants came to me

panicked and said there was a drunk man in the church who was yelling. He was very angry, he was threatening, and there was no pastor around in the building. So tag, the intern is it.

So I've never dealt with anything like this before and I was pretty young so I was freaked out a little bit about it. But I met with him and he was very drunk and he was very angry. So I took him into the sanctuary of the church and I sat down and I just said, "Tell me your story." So he started telling me his story and I found out that through a series of disasters that were not his fault, not his fault at all, he had ended up homeless. And then after that, he had begun to drink. And by this time, he wasn't yelling, he was crying, because of all the pain in his life. So I started to pray for him and this was awkward, but I started to pray for him and while I was praying for him, he kept trying to kiss me. I think he just wanted to be close, but it was invasive and inappropriate. So I said, "No, we're not. We're praying here. We're praying."

And when I got done praying, I mean, this is just an awkward story, word of warning, when I got done praying, he said, "I have family in Vancouver, B.C. Would you give me money for a bus ticket to get there?" And I said, "How about I go to the bus station with you, buy you a bus ticket, buy you dinner, and put you on the bus?" And he said, "That works too." So I called a cab. We got in, and as we were about to merge onto I-5 South off of 45th Street in the U. District, some of you can picture it, we were on the on ramp and he said, "I have to go to the bathroom." And he jumped out of the car and started taking care of business right there on the on-ramp. At which point the cab driver started yelling at me. I'm like, "Why are you yelling at me? I'm not the one." And I had a bad attitude. I was mad. I'd been with this guy over two hours at this point. Got him back in the car, got to the bus station, bought his ticket, bought him dinner.

And then it happened. I got this thought, in an absolute moral perspective, I'm just like this guy. I have all kinds of unpleasant habits that hurt myself and others. I thought about how I'd hurt my parents through rebellion, thought about how I'd lived with my girlfriend but that broke up because I was so selfish. Thought about how I had out of control anger issues so bad I had put holes in the doors in my parents' house by kicking them in rage. I was filled with lust and envy and petty jealousies, not to mention the judgmental thoughts I was thinking about this man who was made in the image of God. And I thought, whose heart is more sinful here? I think it's mine. Just because I can hide the ugliness in my life better than he can doesn't mean it's not there. I think it's me. But Jesus loves me anyways, pursues me anyways, and I started to feel forgiven and deeply loved and, feeling that, I suddenly had more love for this man.

So I said to him, "Jesus wants to do how much with your life." And this man said, "No, no, no, no way. Not with my life. No. Nothing Jesus can do in my life, uh-huh (affirmative)." And I said, "Oh, you just threw down the gauntlet. When you say that, he's going to go to town and he's going to prove you wrong. Because right here, my man, right here, this is the good stuff. Not when we're looking at our best, but right here where we feel at our worst. Right here, especially here, that's where Jesus is going to meet us and that's where Jesus is going to love us. And even though we're a mess and I am a mess, he will give us power to live differently. Do you want that in your life?" And he said, "Yes." And so he prayed and became a follower of Jesus. And it was a good thing. It was a good day. Good day at the office.

And when he got done, I said, "When you get to your family in Vancouver, please do two things. Find a church and get into rehab because Jesus wants to do so much with your life." Now, I had no way to follow up with him. I hope he did those two things. But at bare minimum, I know he felt God's love through me. Not because of me, in spite of me. Because Jesus loves me, and when I experienced that, I was able to extend it to him. And I remember going home

after that, he was on the bus, I remember going home thinking, "I love my job. That was so cool. What an adventure. I didn't see that coming this morning." It was awesome. You see, when we are drunk on our own self-importance, making a mess of things in a million ways, Jesus left heaven came to us, loved and served us in undignified, humiliating ways, and he is passionately, irrationally in your corner for you.

I want to close with what I think was one of the sweetest moments in the Olympics, and some of you may have seen this, where a 17 year old swimmer named Lydia Jacoby, who was not expected to win anything, not expected to win anything, won the Gold Medal for the 100 meter breaststroke. She's 17. She's from Alaska. There's only one Olympic sized pool in the entire state. And I love this picture of her. This is the moment she realizes she won a Gold Medal. She didn't expect to win anything either. Nobody expected her to win anything. But what I really love was that back at her high school in Alaska, her classmates were watching the race, cheering her on convinced that she was going to win. And I'm going to show you a really short clip of them cheering, and I want you to pay attention to the guy in the lower left in the blue and yellow shorts. Take a look. My daughter called that guy jumping up and down pounding the ground, she calls him "Gorilla Guy." Like Gorilla Guy, I'm pounding up and down on the floor like a gorilla.

Not very dignified, but super cool. And it is so Jesus, who is passionately, irrationally cheering you on and he doesn't care if it looks dignified or not. Washing feet isn't dignified. Dying on a cross isn't dignified. He is passionately, irrationally cheering you and he is for you when you win and he is for you when you lose. He is for you in your success and he is for you in your failures. He is for you when you were at your best and he is for you when you are at your absolute worst. And when we feel that love, you can scale any wall, you can win any race, you can change the lives of people around you through the power of his love working through you. So Jesus, thank you. It's all about your love. And so, Lord, we ask that you would help us to experience your love in ways that change us and make us different and serve not out of obligation for your gracious invitation to make a difference. We ask this in your name, Jesus. Amen.

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### **Discussion Questions:**

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Read John 13:1-17 and answer the below questions with your friends, family or All In small group.

#### **Ice Breaker Question:**

- What is something that you are thankful for today?

#### **Opening Questions:**

- Looking back, were you able to apply any of the things we talked about last time to your life this week? What did you do? How did it go?

#### **Scripture Reflection Questions** – Together read John 13:1-17 and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage and sermon?

- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

**Sermon Reflection Questions** – Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following

- What do you think is the most significant verse in this passage? Why?
- In what ways do you feel Jesus has washed your feet?

**Closing Question and Application:**

- Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

**Closing group prayer:** Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.