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## Letters to a Young Episcopalian: Foot Washing

*This letter is part of a series of fictional letters by Canon George Maxwell intended for Episcopalians young and old who wonder what it means to be faithful in the world today.*

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Dear Anna,

It dawns on me that you might not know about Mister Rogers.

Fred Rogers was a Presbyterian minister, who created a television show for children called *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. Your mother would have watched it.

In an early episode, Mister Rogers is resting his feet in a plastic pool. It was a hot day and Mister Rogers invited the neighborhood police officer to put his feet in the cool water too.

They sat next to each other in two metal folding chairs. The police officer is in his uniform. Mister Rogers is in one of his familiar cardigan sweaters. They are both wearing big grins on their faces. Their pants legs are rolled up. And, their bare feet are visible in the water.

I recently listened to an interview of Francois Clemmons, who played the police officer. "The icon Fred Rogers," he said, "not only was showing my brown skin in the tub with his white skin as two friends, but as I was getting out of that tub, he was helping me dry my feet."

Clemmons had joined the cast of the show the year before, becoming the first African-American to have a recurring role on a children's television show.

Mister Rogers offers the best commentary I can imagine on why we wash feet on Maundy Thursday.

The Gospel of John describes Jesus as washing the feet of his disciples at the last meal they have together. It's an example, he says, of how to love others as he has loved them.

Public foot washing isn't part of our lives any more, though. When Jesus arrived at someone's house after a long journey, he would have expected to have his feet washed by a servant or one of his disciples. It was the hospitable thing to do.

Now, when we try to understand foot washing in the context of ordinary experience, we focus on what Jesus did and then talk about service, or we focus on what the disciples might have felt and then talk about vulnerability.

Mister Rogers focuses us instead on how we see each other and talks about friendship.

By washing his feet, Mister Rogers claims Clemmons as a friend.

Foot washing is about service, and it is about vulnerability, but it's really about how those things can build friendships that

we couldn't have imagined before.

It also helps, I think, to laugh while you're doing it!

Your affectionate uncle,  
Ames

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