
Feet in the Water

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell
Maundy Thursday**

Do you remember Mister Rogers?

Fred Rogers was a Presbyterian minister who created a television program for children called Mister Rogers' Neighborhood. Your mother watched it. You may have too. And if you have children or grandchildren, chances are they have as well. The show ran for thirty-three years, and something about it — the gentle voice, the cardigan sweater, the quiet insistence that you were worthy of being loved exactly as you are — never seems to wear out.

In an early episode, Mister Rogers is sitting outside on a warm day, resting his feet in a small plastic pool. He invites a neighbor to join him — Officer Clemmons, the neighborhood police officer, played by a man named François Clemmons. They pull up two metal folding chairs and sit side by side. They roll up their pant legs. They take off their shoes and socks. And there they sit — Mister Rogers in his cardigan, Officer Clemmons in his uniform — feet together in the cool water, both of them grinning.

François Clemmons, who joined the cast that year as the first African American to have a recurring role on a children's television program, later reflected on what that moment meant. Fred Rogers, he said, was not only showing his brown skin in the water alongside white skin, as two friends. He was also, as Clemmons climbed out of the pool, drying his feet with a towel.

Mister Rogers offers us the best commentary I know on why we wash feet on Maundy Thursday.

The Gospel of John tells us that on the last night Jesus shared a meal with his disciples, he got up from the table, stripped off his outer robe, tied a towel around his waist, poured water into a basin, and began to wash his disciples' feet. When he was finished, he gave them a new commandment: love one another, he said, just as I have loved you.

The foot-washing and the commandment are not two separate things. The washing is the commandment, enacted before it is spoken. This is what love looks like. This is its shape, its posture, and its temperature. It gets low. It takes hold of what is most vulnerable. It dries carefully with a towel.

Public foot-washing isn't part of our lives anymore, so we have to work to make sense of it. We focus on what Jesus did — the kneeling, the serving — and we talk about humility. We focus on what the disciples must have felt — the exposure, the intimacy — and we talk about vulnerability. Both are right. Both are real. But Mister Rogers points us somewhere else. Toward friendship.

Think about what Fred Rogers was doing in that moment by the pool. He wasn't performing humility. He wasn't making a point about service. He was sitting next to a man, in the sun, with their feet in the same water, and he was grinning. And when François Clemmons got up to leave, Rogers knelt and dried his feet.

It was 1969. The United States was one year past the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. Cities had burned. The culture was telling François Clemmons a clear story about whose skin belonged where, about who served whom, and about which bodies were worthy of tenderness and which were not.

And Fred Rogers, with a plastic pool and a towel, told a different story.

He didn't make a speech. He didn't issue a statement. He just put his feet in the water next to his friend's feet, and he dried those feet with a towel, and he smiled the whole time. And in that ordinary, ridiculous, tender

moment — two grown men with their pant legs rolled up — something true was said that no speech could have said better.

That is what Jesus is doing in the upper room. He is telling a different story about whose body matters, about who gets to be cared for, about what the world looks like when love sets the terms instead of power. He is not making a point. He is making a friendship. And he is insisting — with water and a towel before a single word is spoken — that this friendship will be the shape of everything that follows.

In a few moments, you will be invited to share in this washing.

Someone near you will ask. The asking itself is part of it. To ask is to risk rejection — to reach across the small distance between two chairs. And when you say yes, you will feel something of what François Clemmons felt: the tenderness of being cared for by someone who doesn't have to — who chooses to and is smiling while they do it.

And then the roles will reverse. You will kneel. You will take someone's feet in your hands. You will dry them carefully with a towel.

In that exchange — that simple, slightly awkward, entirely holy exchange — the new commandment passes between you. Not preached. Not explained. Given, the way Jesus gave it: in flesh and water, at eye level, with a towel.

This is what love looks like. Not love at a safe height. Not love that keeps its distance or manages its exposure. Love that pulls up a chair. Love that rolls up its pant legs and puts its feet in the water next to yours. Love that, when you get up to leave, kneels and makes sure you're dry.

François Clemmons said one more thing about that afternoon by the pool. He said that what he remembered most — alongside the tenderness, alongside the significance of it — was that they laughed.

Of course they did. Two men with their shoes off, feet in a plastic tub, grinning at each other on a summer day. There is something a little funny about it. Something light, human, and free.

I think that's right too. Jesus, on the last night of his life, could have done many things. He chose the basin, the towel, the kneeling, and the drying. It is a serious act. It carries the weight of Good Friday already moving in the room. But it is also, if you let yourself feel it, a little like two friends with their feet in the water on a warm afternoon. Present to each other. Unguarded. Glad.

That gladness is not incidental. It is part of the commandment. Love one another, Jesus says, as I have loved you. And this — this willingness to be silly, present, and undefended, to kneel and dry and smile — this is how he has loved us.

So let it be a little funny tonight, if it wants to be. Let it be warm. Let it be what it is: two people, side by side, feet in the same water, telling each other a different story about the world.

Go and do likewise.