

John Sampson
“In Praise of Dirty Feet”
Text: Acts 1:1 - 11
Preached at KVCC
May 28, 2017

Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our rock, and our redeemer. AMEN.

Today I preach without my shoes and socks. And it's not because the ground is holy, although it is. I preach barefooted so that all of you can see my feet, my dirty feet.

To fall in love with some else's eyes, or their mouth, or their face seems obvious, and natural. It is a movement of sexual and romantic attraction that needs no defense.

But to fall in love with another's feet, to have our gaze turn downwards to the part of a person's body that literally connects

them to the ground upon which they walk, is often seen as bordering on the perverse.

And why not? Our feet have little to recommend themselves to our ever-searching hearts.

Our feet can be deformed by years of wearing shoes that don't fit right. They can have corns and bunions, blisters and callouses. Our toenails can be unclipped, or ingrown. And there is always the smell: unpleasant and an embarrassment. Covered by socks and shoes we attempt to keep our feet clean, but at the end of the day they are always dirty, always covered with some amount of the earth that they are so intimately connected to.

To reveal our feet to another is a sign of vulnerability, because it shares a part of ourselves, a part that we often find ugly and

embarrassing. To reveal our feet can be an uncomfortable confession.

But there is another side to how we engage with our feet.

I think Georges Bataille gets it right in the quotation I shared as the opening meditation in this morning's bulletin. Our feet are also an object of pride for us. They are the portion of our body that allows us to stand erect, to look up beyond the earth and consider the stars, and the heavenly realm. They are what separate us from the apes, our closest animal relatives. For some anthropologists believe that our ability to walk upright freed our hands to start making tools, that foundational skill, which allowed us to put our simian past behind us, and become truly human.

Thus, our feet are the perfect symbol for the conflicted way in which we, as humans, understand ourselves. They are both the symbol of

our base nature, and the very organ that allows us to embrace the spiritual and intellectual promise of our humanity.

And these feet, these parts of our body that have taken on our psychological and social anxieties, take center stage in many Christian traditions that have meditated on the miraculous event described in this morning's reading. Today we remember and celebrate the Ascension, the moment when the resurrected Jesus was assumed into heaven in glory to take his place at the right hand of God. Occurring in broad daylight, before his disciples, Jesus being taken up to God's throne is a proclamation of the truth of his message, and who he is as a person, a person with dirty feet.

In this time of Easter we celebrate the resurrection of God's presence on earth in the person of Jesus. Our scriptures tell us that Jesus was not resurrected simply in spirit; he was also raised in body. His disciples poked and prodded Jesus' resurrection body.

They fed it; they heard it speak, and followed it as it traveled around the countryside. And as Jesus walked and taught for the days and weeks after he was resurrected his feet became dirty. But they weren't just dirty. They were also tragically wounded. One of the most important realities of Jesus' resurrection body was that it still bore the wounds of his crucifixion. Both of his feet were marked by the holes from the nails that were driven into them by his Roman executioners. Even after the resurrection, their flesh remained shredded, and they bled, and oozed. To be resurrected is not to live with your wounds healed and your flesh perfectly restored. To be resurrected is to be called to a new life that remembers, and continues to carry the marks of its own mortal history. And it is this shattered body, this wounded and dirty body, this body that still somehow lives and works for the glory of God's kin-dom, that is welcomed into heaven.

Think of the scene. Jesus stands among his disciples. They've asked him about when Israel's sovereignty will be restored. The resurrected Christ knows they still don't get it; they still don't understand what it means for him to be their messiah. He tells them that God's spirit will flood them, and that they will share his message to the ends of the world.

And then it is done.

Jesus has completed his mission.

His time on earth is finished. On a dusty hilltop, under the hot afternoon sun, surrounded by his closest friends and followers, Jesus's compromised body begins to rise. Slowly, but undeniably, he is moving up towards the heavens. I imagine his disciples didn't believe what they were seeing. Perhaps they protested and desperately begged him to stay with them for just a day, or a week

more. They gazed into Jesus' eyes one last time, the eyes they had fallen in love with as he looked straight into their hearts and told them that they were blessed by God and would mourn no more. They looked at Jesus' mouth one final moment; the mouth that they desired would never stop telling them about God's dream of peace and compassion for all of humanity. They looked at Jesus' face, a face so common and unremarkable, but one that nevertheless radiated with the spirit of the Holy One. And then these objects of desire, these beautiful attributes of their teacher, were gone as Jesus ascended to heaven. They saw his robe and his hands ascend, they saw his belt, and the hem of his cloak rise skyward. And as he ascended their final image of Jesus, their last picture of their Rabbi, the last impression they had of the one they called the Christ was his dirty, bloody feet.

It is this moment that is captured in the images contained in our bulletin this morning. It is this moment when we look at Jesus from

below, from the perspective of the disciples, that we see him travel into God's realm above us. And it is Jesus' feet that swallow our field of vision and become all we have left of our Savior.

And then he is taken from us. He disappears into heaven.

What is your image of heaven?

How do you understand the place that receives Jesus and his bloody and dirty feet? Is it a place of eternal, spiritual purity? Is it a place that accepts no disability of body, or of faith, or of belief? Is it a place that will only open itself to you if you are perfect?

Many of us, myself included, grew up with the church, and our society, presenting us with insipid images of heaven looking like a Greek temple where everything was white and made of marble. In the pictures I was shown everyone was Caucasian and bleached to

perfection just like the togas they wore. And there was no dust, or dirt anywhere. Even though we intellectually know as adults that these are only images for children, perhaps, for some of us, these childish images still have a hold on our hearts and spirits. On a primal level these pictures of heaven may still operate within us and guide our religious beliefs concerning salvation, and what will happen to us after we die.

If this is our image of heaven, if we believe that God only accepts the truly pure and untainted, then Jesus' ascension into the Presence of God must seem like a blasphemous meteor, a meteor that falls upward and is a shocking surprise to the truly righteous that attend the Divine. Imagine Jesus arriving in this Oxy Clean heaven. As he walks its corridors, as he enters the throne room of God, as he takes his seat next to the Holy One, he tracks dirt and grime across the impeccably vacuumed and buffed floors. His bloody feet leave

footprints everywhere he goes. His arrival in heaven inaugurates its desecration.

But Jesus is not a surprise. He doesn't arrive in heaven unannounced and he doesn't crash a party that only the perfect can attend. He was invited. The God of all creation and of all time reached down to earth and brought up her Son, with his dirty wounded feet.

This is something new for us. We see a new vector of the communication between heaven and earth in this story of Jesus' Ascension. Up until this point we have only seen the celestial descend to our world. We have heard God's voice from the sky at the Transfiguration; we have seen the dove of the Holy Spirit descend on Jesus from above during his baptism; we have heard Jesus tell us that he has emptied himself and defected out of God's presence to live down here among us. So far, it has been acceptable

for heaven to touch our lives from a distance, and to bless us and encourage us from the security of a remote throne. It is as if our tradition has been telling us that God interacts with her children only in acts of supreme condescension.

But God is a God of love. She is love itself. She is the love of a mother who washes her son's dirty socks every day after he gets home from baseball practice. She doesn't resent her son because she has to run a load of laundry every day; she celebrates him and wants him to grow into a man who lives into his dreams. She is a mother who kisses her daughter's feet even though they are covered with earthy dust, because she knows that if she waits for them to be truly clean she will never be able to kiss her daughter.

The authors of Genesis told us that God formed humanity from dust. She molded us from clay and got dirty in our very creation. For the authors of our Bible there has never been a time when the

relationship between human and Divine has been anything but...soiled.

And though we have been talking about dirty feet, we are also talking about dirty hearts, and dirty minds. Jesus' wounded, dusty feet are also a metaphor for all of the ways we fail before God. And all of the ways we are ultimately accepted by the Divine.

For God loves us when we don't love our neighbors as ourselves. God loves us when our hearts are filthy with self-centeredness. God loves us when our minds are contaminated with hate against our friends and our families. God loves us even when we crucify her most beloved vision of what we could be as humans. God loves us when we are imperfect, because we will never be perfect, and she can't wait for us to get our acts together to reach out and kiss us, and embrace us, and welcome us into the heaven of her proximity.

The question is not whether or not we can be pure enough to allow God to love us. The question is whether or not we can put down our own selfishness to see the Divine grace all around us, and show our Mother we actually love her back. And we can show her that we love her back by loving all of her dirty, wounded children as ourselves.

I preach today showing you my feet, sharing with you my embodied confession. I am one of God's dirty wounded children. I can't be anything else. None of us can.

Our story of Jesus ascending into heaven reveals a deep truth to us. We are all broken and imperfect. But the doors to heaven are not closed to us. God will reach down and raise us into her presence, dirty feet and all.

AMEN.

