

This is one of those stories that is written so well and so clearly that I can almost see it all, frame by frame, in my mind's eye. I imagine Jesus – gathered with his friends, quietly munching on olives and cheese, recounting the day's events, hanging out. Jesus is oddly quiet and reserved. Tension hangs in the air.

But then Jesus does something weird. He strips to his underwear, grabs a basin and water jug, and proceeds to wash everyone's feet. Back then, men were very modest in how they dressed. Hands, feet and face were about the only skin that ever showed. So for Jesus to strip to the equivalent of his boxer-briefs and wrap around a towel was a bit of a shocker, to say the least.

And for him to wash everyone's feet was also definitely not normal. Imagine walking around day after day, week after week, in sandals made out of one piece of leather for the sole and some rope or twine to hold it onto your foot. In desert country, where they lived, it was dusty all the time ... sandy ... and there was nothing to keep the grime from covering you up past your ankles. Even if you look past the blisters and calluses that that kind of footwear would cause, feet often get sweaty. (*icky face*) And in such a dry climate, don't forget, bathing was a rare luxury ... Add all that up, their toe-jam (as my kids would call it) wasn't exactly pleasant. Nobody wanted the task of washing someone's feet.

Truly, there was no way for the person doing the foot washing to possibly stay clean themselves – it was a disgusting job! Peter, who is already stressed out, voices his incredulity and tells Jesus he shouldn't be doing this – because in their day, only the lowliest of servants washed feet – it certainly wasn't appropriate for Jesus to be doing the task.

Of course, this story takes place just before Jesus spends the night in Gethsemane, is arrested, taken before Pilate, and later hung on the cross. He knows that his closest friends will betray him and deny that they know him.

He knows that he will be tortured and murdered. ...And yet. And yet he humbles himself, takes a towel and wipes away their dirt and their grime, taking all that yuck upon his own person.

For me, this event that John describes is the key to understanding Jesus' relationship to us.

I don't know about you, but I know that I'm nowhere close to being a perfect Christian. Most days I'm not sure that I have the right to even call myself a Christian at all because – if I'm honest with myself - I'm not very good at following Christ. Try as I might to make good choices and do the right things, I fail – sometimes miserably. Intentionally or not, I sometimes hurt the people I love the most. I hear of people who need help in one way or another and I don't step up and do what I can. I'm often lazy when it comes to prayer and study. (The list could easily go on!) And all that makes me feel dirty – on a soul level. I confess, to my own shame, that many of the paths I've taken on my Christian journey, as well as those paths that I have consciously avoided taking, have left me metaphorically filthy and grimy.

But Jesus takes all that on himself. Virtually naked, he gets down on his hands and knees and wipes away the dirt and the grime from every person who chooses to journey with him. The ablution is transformed into absolution. Jesus transforms a degrading chore into a beautiful act of love. He gets down and dirty with everyone's literal and metaphorical filth so that they can be clean. He knows who is going to betray him and why. He knows who is going to desert him and why. He knows who will doubt him and why.

And it doesn't matter. Knowing what it would cost him, he washes them clean anyway.

He does it anyway. Because he loves them. He can't help but love them. And because Jesus loves them, it doesn't matter that they get spiritually dirty, so long as they are open to letting the grace of God clean them up again.

When we let God in to see our junk, to see our spiritual toe jam – our “soul-jam,” if you will – those parts of us that we'd prefer to keep to ourselves and deal with only in private – God takes care of it.

Jesus' closest friends weren't perfect. And we aren't perfect. And we aren't expected to be perfect. We're human, and we're going to screw up from time to time. That's the way God created us, and while it's not a pass to go and do whatever we want, it is reassurance that when we lose our way, as long as we keep trying to orient ourselves toward God, it will work out okay in the end. Jesus' willingness to do the dirty work makes it okay.

You and me? Even with all our flaws and all our baggage and all our doubt and all our fear and all our secrets and all our anger and all our failures, we're okay. According to Scripture, we're better than okay – God says from the very beginning that we're Good... in fact, we are told in chapter one of the first book of our Bible that we are Very Good.

Tonight we are blessed to have holy time set apart to acknowledge all of our own soul-jam, and allow God's love to wipe it clean. In a moment, we'll have the opportunity to have our feet washed, and for those who are willing, to be an instrument of our Lord's grace and wash the feet of someone else.

As we enter the final hours of our Lenten journey, as our liturgical season of fasting and self-examination draws to a close, we have a chance tonight to enter into that sacred time that Jesus shared with his disciples. We, too, can experience Jesus's act of grace which foreshadows our ultimate redemption. We, too, are invited to bear our \*soles\* so that Jesus can wash them clean.