

Spring Training for the Christian Team
Lent 6: The Toughest Opponents Faith Ever Met
(Isaiah 50: 4-9a; Philippians 2: 1-11; Psalm 118; John 13: 1-17)

Our season of Lent has been a little unusual this year, hasn't it? On our "Spring Training" model, which we borrowed unashamedly from professional baseball, we've been getting a lot of exercise—maybe not so much the running-and-jumping kind, but certainly the *thinking* kind. And we've been getting extra *reading* exercise, with all the added responsive parts in our worship and the bonus material in the bulletins, and we've even thrown in a bunch of new service music and hymns, which is yet another kind of exercise, not unlike weight-lifting in that it tends to leave some people stiff and sore.

In our meditation time right through Lent, we've played a series of exhibition games against all kinds of opponents and enemies of Christian faith, from Giants and Thorns to Tongues and Walls. At this point in the series, I wouldn't be at all surprised if some were getting a little tired and looking for a rest and a change. Well, sorry to disappoint, but we do have another game today. And although they don't really have playoffs in Spring Training, by some quirk of the schedule, the team we're going to meet today are indeed the very toughest of the lot. This will be, without a doubt, the most difficult and crucial game, not merely of the season, but of life itself. This is the one that puts it all on the line. This is the game that will surely overflow the stadium and spill out onto the streets, and it may go on for quite awhile. So, just in case you *are* feeling a little tired and worn and might prefer to sit this one out, I'm here to tell you, as coach: "*Tough luck!* Get your uniforms on and take the field!

Exactly *who* the opponents are today, is hard to say, and that's because they are absolute masters of deception. These guys have a thousand disguises, and it's virtually impossible to put your finger on them or to identify them clearly. I can tell you what some of them are made of: most commonly they have elements of pride and stubbornness in roughly a 50/50 mix; sometimes it's self-pity that shows first, often there's some embarrassment in the mix. On occasion, it may be a sense of shame that dominates; just as often, it's an inexplicable thick-headedness. It's hard to say *exactly* who or what these opponents are, and I don't really know what to call them, but here's how you can recognize them: by their style of play. What these little devils will do is this: they will make you say "NO" at the wrong moment. They will, by masterful cunning and stealth, make your mouth and/or your mind say "NO" right at the moment when something huge is at stake and you probably haven't even realized it. That's the crafty, sneaky technique they use, and it's enormously successful because these guys, as I

told you right up front, are the toughest, dirtiest, winningest team we Christians will ever meet. These guys are the ones who can test our faith in such a way that they put the whole thing on the line. Be sure of this, team: these guys play for a lot more than the league championship.

Well, that's what we're up against today. And, as in all of our previous games, we need to go straight to the biblical text and quickly grab some strategy and a game plan, and maybe an example or two, to take with us into the game, if we have any hope of winning. Our gospel text this morning is the familiar story of the foot washing during Holy Week, and this, I'll suggest, is one of the best examples you will ever find of our opponents this morning playing their game and playing it well.

As a word of introduction to our text, there's something about this story and about John's gospel that we need to be aware of. This story follows a major turning point in John's gospel. In the first 12 chapters of his book, John painted his portrait of Jesus as a teacher. He outlined the lessons Jesus taught and the impact he had on those who heard his teaching. Now, beginning with the 13th chapter, John begins to look ahead to the death and resurrection of Jesus. He begins to describe the events leading up to Easter, and he introduces this second half of his gospel with a remarkable comment that "Jesus now proceeded to show his disciples the full extent of his love." And the illustration that immediately follows is the story of the foot washing.

This little story, you may have noticed, is far more than just another episode in the life of Jesus. This story is a *parable* in every way—a story that teaches, in a graphic and memorable way. It's a story that is acted out, by real characters, and it sets before us a lesson that's larger than life. Like every good parable, this one packs a powerful surprise, but unlike most of the other parables where the surprise comes at the end, in this one the surprise is unleashed right at the beginning. The surprise is that Jesus was the one who picked up the bucket and towel and went around the table on his knees. To say that's a surprise is a serious understatement. It would have been shocking, scandalous and utterly unthinkable, both to the disciples around that table and to the earliest readers of the story. That's not to say that washing of feet was unusual in itself, or even the act of washing someone else's feet. On the contrary, that was one of the dictates of etiquette in the Middle East in the first century, and it made good sense, given the fact that the roads in those days were either dust or mud, depending on the season, and given the additional fact that people wore skimpy sandals and socks hadn't been invented. Etiquette, at least as much as necessity, dictated that if you were inviting people to dine at your house, it was your social responsibility, as the host, to see to it that the feet of each guest were

washed. What was quite *unthinkable*, however, was that you, as the host, should be the one to do that washing of feet. That was the job of a slave. Or if you didn't have a slave, then the lowest of the hired servants, and if you didn't have hired servants, then the youngest child. That job was for the lowest one on the totem pole, the very bottom of the pecking order. In fact, just to make that idea even clearer, the laws of the day, both civil and religious, stated that no free citizen could ever be forced to wash the feet of anyone else. Certainly no teacher, no leader, no rabbi would ever stoop to wash another person's feet. To do so would be to give up any claim to authority or leadership, and to become instead a household slave. When Jesus bent over with bucket and towel, he knowingly put at risk any and all authority, leadership and respect the disciples may have seen in him. He put it all on the line.

Despite the risk, Jesus didn't hesitate for a moment to pick up the bucket and make the rounds. He willingly endured the potential humiliation, and it's interesting that he endured it a lot better than some of the disciples, for example, Simon Peter. Simon was the one who broke the silence and "put his foot down", as they say, though a little prematurely and not exactly in the bucket. Well known for his tendency to speak his mind, whether or not he happened to be using it at the time, Simon Peter angrily challenged Jesus, "You are *not* going to wash my feet!" Jesus suggested in reply that something more important than feet was afoot in this action. But Peter, by now quite famous for his ability to avoid using his ears, answered with an absolute refusal: "You will *never* wash my feet!" Jesus answered also with absolutes: "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me." Unless you receive the free gift that I give and the service I offer, you have no part in my love, no place in my kingdom. In an unusual moment of insight, Simon Peter suddenly realizes that he has put his own dirty foot in his mouth! He makes a very abrupt and perhaps over-dramatized turnabout and he asks if not merely his feet but his hands and head also might be washed.

Just before we leave the story to get back to our game, we need to notice one more thing in the story. When the foot washing is completed and Jesus returns to his place at the table, and while the disciples are still rubbing their eyes and scratching their heads, Jesus takes the opportunity to underline the point of the exercise—that this is to be the pattern and rule for Christian discipleship. "You also," he explained with utmost clarity, "should wash one another's feet!" You need to learn how to put aside any claim to prestige or status or self-importance, and you must learn to care for each other on the level of the most basic human needs. And so the story-parable is not merely an illustration, but also a real-life example and a

firm command. It illustrates faith, on the one hand, and it demonstrates discipleship on the other. That's a powerful story that can do that.

The thing that you can't fail to notice in our story, and the insight that's going to provide the all-important strategy for our game today, is that the receiving comes first, and it's not an option. Everything is hanging on the response to what Christ offers, and nothing can happen, in the story or beyond, until the right answer. The other thing you can't fail to notice, of course, is just how fast Simon Peter's mouth said "NO", two out of three times.

So, let's open the field up a little. We noted in the story the comment Jesus made, to the effect that the whole bucket-and-towel exercise is about more than just feet. That's good to know, because 2000 years later, blessed as we are with things like socks and shoes, paved roads and sidewalks and soap, it might have been easy for us to sweep the story aside. Unlike Jesus and his 1st century contemporaries, it's not our feet that get most readily soiled and bruised by the contact with daily living. It's not likely our feet that need most a good washing at the end of a day. But there are parts of us that certainly *do* get a little dusty and dirty each day we live, and I can tell you, both from experience and from observation, where the dirt builds up: it's in our feelings, more specifically in our self-respect and self-confidence, and it's also in our conscience with regard to things we've said or done to the feelings of others. For us, it's those parts on the inside that get continually dusted up and muddied, and just like Peter and his feet, these are the things that we will probably find too personal to talk about, too sensitive and potentially embarrassing to open up and present to someone else for a good cleansing.

I think it's quite simply impossible to go through a single day without getting a few pokes and bruises in your feelings, without getting at least a little mud on your self-confidence and a little guilt on your conscience. For most of us, no matter what kind of work we do, the dust and dirt that may show outwardly at the end of the day is virtually nothing compared to the dust and dirt that does not show, the kind that goes more than skin-deep, and the kind that's almost impossible to wash off. Each day we live, we have a great need for a very special kind of cleaning, involving more than just soap and water. And it is for this very cleansing that Jesus Christ still stoops down before us, with self-giving love and life-giving forgiveness, and freely offers his help. He asks only that we give him the opportunity, only that we open up and receive his gift. And though it's true that the receiving will certainly be even more humbling than the giving, that's all that is needed. Only receive.

Now, if that sounds simple, *it is*. Faith, when you see right down to its heart, is just as uncomplicated as that. Simple, yes! But if you think it sounds *easy*, you're already in trouble.

For most of us, the receiving will always be the hardest part. That's where the inward opposition will be the toughest and quickest. That's also where, just like Simon Peter, we'll be in constant danger of putting the foot in our mouth rather than in the hands of the one with the bucket and towel.

Let me give a few examples about receiving being the hard part, and you may notice that the application—which I'll leave to you to flesh out for yourselves—quickly widens to cover almost every aspect of faith. Have you ever encountered people who simply cannot receive a *compliment*? You make a special point of telling someone that he's done a really great job, or that you really appreciated her effort, and they immediately deflect it with a question like "Who, me?" or a comment like "Oh, it was nothing." It's frustrating, isn't it, when someone simply cannot or will not receive your compliment. I think that was part of Simon Peter's problem when he suggested that he didn't deserve to have Jesus wash his feet.

How about people who cannot receive a *favour*, without very quickly taking note of the cost, hastily promising to repay, or else feeling obviously guilty or embarrassed? You do something special for someone simply because you want to do it, and suddenly the whole exchange becomes an exercise in international diplomacy, your motives are questioned and challenged, and the gift is utterly and hopelessly misunderstood. That was also part of Simon Peter's problem, and I'll bet that even after he consented, at the very moment Jesus was washing his feet, Simon Peter was probably saying under his breath, "I'd rather do it myself!"

It's far more tragic when you encounter people who simply cannot receive a word of *encouragement*. It often happens that people get so comfortable in their self-pity and so strangely content in their worries, that they prefer not to be cheered or helped or encouraged, and they'll avoid anyone who tries.

Far more common are people who simply cannot receive constructive *criticism* without getting overly defensive or flying right off the handle. On our analogy of the bucket and towel, these are the ones who might tell you to your face, "Take your bucket and get out of here—*my feet don't smell!*" That's another thought that may have been running through the mind of Simon Peter, and I'm almost surprised he *didn't* say it. Still, he had more than enough trouble already with receiving, and because of that, he almost made a deadly mistake.

Thankfully, for Simon Peter and for us, Jesus explained clearly and without a moment to spare, what was at stake in the receiving. The receiving has everything to do with faith in Christ. It's just like his love, his forgiveness, his death for us, his resurrection for us, his Holy Spirit for us. Faith is the receiving—*opening up* our lives, our needs and our relationships, to

his cleansing, healing and forgiving. And just like he told Simon Peter, unless we receive what he gives, we have no part with him, no living relationship with him nor any hope of doing the work he has given us.

Faith is in the receiving. That's the lesson of this acted parable that "shows the full extent of Christ's love". No matter how difficult or awkward, embarrassing or threatening we may find this business of simply receiving, we must put aside completely the excuses, the pride, the shame, the fear, the stubbornness, or whatever else it is that makes us *avoid* receiving, and puts us in danger of missing out on the saving faith and healing grace and the desperately needed forgiveness.

Whatever it is that tries to put the word "NO" in our mouths or our hearts at the very moment when faith is on the line, we've got to be aware of it, nip it in the bud, out-manoeuve it, out-hustle it, or whatever else it takes to take it out. This contest, we must win. Our need is too great. Our need for the love and grace of Christ is too important to be cheated out of by some foolish inhibition about dirty feet, or about showing your feelings, or about opening up and confessing a guilty conscience. Whatever it is that would get in the way and block the receiving of what Christ offers, this is in the realm of our responsibility, and we have to confront it and defeat it.

There's an old native proverb that says, "The hand that is tightly clenched into a fist, cannot receive anything." Nor can a closed mind, nor a heart that's locked shut. What we need, desperately and *repeatedly*, is to receive Christ's gift just as freely as he offers it. That's where faith is at its strongest, freshest and quickest advantage over anything that would tangle with it or threaten it. Simply receive his grace and forgiveness as freely as he offers it.

Rev. Steven K. Smith
Sixth Sunday in Lent
April 5, 2020