

# **“The Towel”**

*The Rev. S. Shane Nanney – April 14, 2022 – Maundy Thursday  
John 13:1-17, 31-35*

Symbols are an important part of our lives. In the secular realm, tall golden arches identify as well-known fast-food chain, and a large rock reminds us of a particular insurance company. In the sacred realm, there are also symbols: a cross, bread and wine, and colors.

One symbol of our faith which is often overlooked, however, is the towel. In liturgical traditions, the stole worn around the minister’s neck is symbolic of the towel Jesus used to dry the disciple’s feet after he washed them. As my son would say, a symbol of a symbol.

Jesus and his disciples had gathered in the upper room to share the Passover meal together one last time. As we read the account in John’s gospel, we search for those words we have heard so many times before: “*AND JESUS TOOK THE BREAD, AND WHEN HE HAD GIVEN THANKS, HE BROKE IT...*” but they are not there, yet.

Instead, at this high moment in his earthly ministry, Jesus “. . . *GOT UP FROM THE MEAL, TOOK OFF HIS OUTER CLOTHING, WRAPPED A TOWEL AROUND HIS WAIST, FILLED A BASIN WITH WATER, AND BEGAN TO WASH THE DISCIPLE’S FEET, DRYING THEM WITH THE TOWEL THAT WAS WRAPPED AROUND HIM.*” And there it is . . . the “Towel Symbol.”

As we study this text, we discover that the towel symbol reminds us of several Christian qualities. For instance, consider the towel as a symbol of love.

John writes, “*HAVING LOVED HIS OWN WHO WERE IN THE WORLD, HE NOW SHOWED THEM THE FULL EXTEND OF HIS LIFE.*” How? With a towel! He would later show them the full extent of his love more profoundly by taking up the cross. This time, however, he took up the basin of water and a towel and washed their feet.

What more loving thing could Jesus have done for his followers on that occasion? They had been traveling the hot dusty, dirty roads of Palestine, wearing only sandals on their feet. Advertisers point out the embarrassing problem of foot odor in our day, but compared with those disciples, we only think we have a problem with dirty, smelly feet.

To wash up for dinner in those days included the washing of your feet, only this task was usually performed by a lowly servant of the house. But Jesus seized the moment to use this as a lesson for the disciples to show them just how much he loved them.

“Actions speak louder than words,” we are told. Notice that Jesus did not just tell his disciples of his love, nor did he offer some discourse on love. He took the water and towel and showed them his love through his action.

Psychologists tell us that it is important not only to tell our children we love them, but also to express that love physically: touching, embracing, and kissing. A lack of affection when a person is a child can make it difficult for that person to feel loved or accepted the rest of his/her life. For love to have any meaning for a child or an adult, it must be active love.

Jesus proved his love genuine by putting it into action. The disciples knew his love was real when Jesus took the towel and washed their feet.

The towel is also a symbol of faith. *“JESUS KNEW... THAT HE HAD COME FROM GOD AND WAS RETURNING TO GOD.”* The towel symbolizes that kind of faith, although this is not an easy to see as the love symbolism.

Without faith, without complete trust in God, Jesus could not have done what he did at that point of his ministry. Death was near. The cross was just hours away. Jesus knew what Judas had up his sleeve. He knew that this was the last time he would gather with the disciples for a meal before his death.

It would also have been so easy for Jesus to have spent all his time dwelling on that, talking about it, dreading it, fearing it even running away from it.

But Jesus knew that he had come from God, and he knew that he was returning to God. And that faith perspective set him free from selfish concerns. His trust in God enabled him to use what time he had left for others.

There is another way in which this towel symbolized faith. *“UNLESS I WASH YOU, YOU HAVE NO PART OF ME.”* Jesus said that to Peter because Peter had just announced, *“THERE IS NO WAY YOU’RE GOING TO WASH MY FEET, LORD!”*

Doesn’t that sound just like us? “I refuse to let anyone do anything for me. I will do it myself, thank you!” But it’s the very nature of our faith that we need for God to do something for us that we cannot do for ourselves. This is what Jesus was trying to get across to Peter. Well, Quick-to-Speak Peter had to first get his feet out of his mouth before Jesus could wash them. But he did, and his reply

was a splendid declaration of faith: *“LORD, DON’T JUST WASH MY FEET, BUT MY HANDS AND MY HEAD AS WELL!”* For the foot washing to occur, it took faith on the part of the giver and the receiver of this ministry, and the towel reminds us of both.

The most obvious Christian quality represented by the towel is service. Slaves would actually wrap a towel around themselves so as to be always prepared to render this service. The towel was the uniform of the servant.

So, it was significant that Jesus *“GOT UP FROM THE MEAL, TOOK OFF HIS OUTER CLOTHING, AND WRAPPED A TOWEL AROUND HIS WAIST.”* That action itself must have said a lot to the disciples. He took off what he was wearing and put on the towel, the very symbol of servanthood.

Jesus didn’t stop there; he went on to perform one of the lowliest acts of service possible when he washed their feet. Their leader and teacher, the one to whom Peter said, *“YOU ARE THE CHRIST!”* washed the disciples’ feet.

I imagine that made quite an impression! These were the same disciples who not so long before had argued who was the greatest and who would set where in the kingdom. No, the greatest of them all, the one held in highest esteem, the one to whom they had committed their lives, became their servant, their foot washer! We recall Paul’s words: *“CHRIST EMPTIED HIMSELF AND TOOK THE FORM OF A SERVANT.”* As Jesus emptied himself of his glory also emptied himself of position and performs this menial task.

Augustine once said of himself: *“A proud man would have perished had not a lowly God found him.”* Christ took the form of a servant. He wore the servant’s garb. He performed the servant’s task. The towel is a symbol of services.

Love, faith, and service: The towel symbolizes all three. It also comes with a challenge and a promise. The challenge: *“NOW THAT I, YOUR LORD AND TEACHER, HAVE WASHED YOUR FEET, YOU SHOULD ALSO WASH ONE ANOTHER’S FEET.”* And the promise: *“NOW THAT YOU KNOW THESE THINGS, YOU WILL BE BLESSED IF YOU DO THEM.”*

Remember Jesus’ acts of love, faith, and service. Remember your baptism. Remember all that Jesus has done for you. Amen.