What’s in a footwashing? It’s a bit more than just washing the feet.

Back in the days of Jesus, people threw human waste and animal waste onto the streets, along with all manner of other trash. Since they wore sandals in that part of the world and walked from place to place, this meant that no matter how well you bathed before you left the house, your feet were really foul by the time you got someplace else. So, the custom was that the lowliest slave of the household washed the feet of all the dinner guests before the meal. Jesus takes this role on himself, out of love for his disciples and also to set an example for his disciples and us about how to relate to each other. We serve each other; we don’t think of ourselves as too good to get down and dirty with someone else to help them.

This is a very strong message and one that we sometimes struggle to follow. But, there’s a second layer to this message that Jesus sent to his disciples and sends to us in this act. We move from the language of the customs of the secular world – that of servants washing feet to make them physically clean – to the language of John’s community of believers. In that language and time, washing feet was, at a deeper level, about forgiveness. The feet (and hands) to that community symbolized actions. To wash someone’s feet (or hands) was to wash away any actions they may have performed.

When Jesus washed his disciples feet, he was saying to them that he forgave them. He forgave Judas, who was about to betray him. He forgave Peter who would soon deny him. He forgave them for any sin they had committed or would commit. He was also telling them that as part of loving one another, they would need to forgive one another.

Forgiveness and the group solidarity it creates are critical aspects of our life together as followers of Jesus. Forgiveness is a large part of what makes and keeps us one in the spirit. It is what the outside world needs to see in us in order to understand that we have something special through Jesus. It is what the outside world needs to see to know that they want this something special, too. Jesus is a model for us in how to forgive. He washed everyone’s feet. He was willing to forgive everyone. We will read in John’s Gospel tomorrow that Jesus forgave those who nailed him to the cross. Jesus died so that we might be forgiven.

Forgiveness often is easier said than done. We all know that we are called to forgive one another, but sometimes we don’t do it. For some reason, we like to dwell in the negative feelings and hurts we have around bad things folks have done to us – sometimes even more so around bad things fellow members of this faith community have done to us. Sometimes we carry a grudge so long we can’t really remember what it was about.

Sometimes we don’t forgive because of the mistaken notion that the person needs to apologize to us for what they’ve done and be restored. But this attitude isn’t helpful and also isn’t true. Forgiveness is simply letting go of ill will and making peace. It’s giving up that security blanket of bitterness. It’s having to give up the notion that we, ourselves, are more righteous than this person who has done something bad to us. Instead, it means having to understand what might be going on in the mind and heart of the other person, what in their past led them to act a certain way. It means having to examine ourselves and see what we may have done to others that we need forgiveness for.

We sometimes think of forgiveness as being something done by a weak person. Actually, forgiveness comes from a position of strength and courage. [[1]](#endnote-1)TED talk speaker and author Brene Brown talks about those qualities that belong to *whole-hearted people*. Being grateful and joyful, forgiving others instead of nursing a grudge, can help each of us to become whole-hearted people. [[2]](#endnote-2) Forgiveness also has been found to improve our own spiritual and mental health. So that in addition to following Jesus’s commandment that we show our love for others in part by forgiving them, we show our love for ourselves by forgiving others.

Tonight it is tradition that we strip the altar. That presents to us a visual symbol of the events that happened to Jesus on this night – abandonment by his disciples, his stripping bare and being nailed to the tree, his giving up of everything for us. The stripping of the altar can also represent for us the stripping away of grudges that we hold and the abandonment of that security blanket of bitterness. Jesus forgave and Jesus forgives. We are called to do the same.

1. All Pro Dad: Five Reasons People Don’t Forgive. <https://www.allprodad.com/5-reasons-people-dont-forgive/> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Mindful Ambition.net – Brene Brown’s 10 Guideposts for Wholehearted Living, <https://mindfulambition.net/wholehearted-living/> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)