

3-28 Coming Out In The Wash John 13:1-5; 12-17; Matt. 27:11-13; 22-26

I remember my first pair of light-colored pants. Back in the 50s and early 60s, the trend was darker, especially for the church-going crowd. I always had a pair of black or navy slacks for church. Maybe it was R.G. Lee or even J. Clyde Turner who led Baptists into the world of linen and cotton summer suits. After this new trend was unofficially sanctioned by some preachers and evangelists, it became acceptable for the rest of us; hence my off-white pants for Easter. I must have been 8 or 9 years old because we were in our first house.

I was so proud to wear them that Easter Sunday morning. Most of the other kids were wearing their traditional dark colors, so I stood out in the group; something I liked at first and then decided I didn't like when a guy named Jimmy in my SS class said, *Oooooo, aren't you pretty*. Lucky for him I was wearing new white pants.

We went home for lunch that day; yes you heard me correctly; not restaurant or drive through; we came home to eat and momma put on her apron and finished what she had already started. I think we had spaghetti that day...or maybe it was meatloaf, I don't remember. What I do remember vividly is that chunk of meat sauce falling off my fork and landing right in the middle of my lap. I remember this event so clearly because it happened in slow motion. NOOOOOOOO.

I wiped the pants off as quickly as I could, but I just smeared the sauce. After my mom helped me clean the pants with a damp cloth, there was still an ugly stain. It was so noticeable and strategically located that I wouldn't possibly be able to wear them again. My mother saw that I was near tears about this utter tragedy and said to me something like, "don't worry; it will come out in the wash."

I don't know where she got the saying, but the stain came out for the most part. I always thought I could see it a little. These were the days before we had the amazing power of Oxiclean (Billy Mays pose).

What comes out in a symbolic wash? In our readings today we have heard about two ceremonial washings. In one, Jesus washed the feet of disciples and in the other Pilate washed his own hands. Let's remember the basic storylines.

In the first, from the Gospel of John chapter 13, Jesus was having the Passover Meal with his disciples in the upper room. John reports that during this lengthy and symbolic meal, Jesus took a basin of water and a towel and began to wash his disciples' feet.

Last Wednesday evening, parents with young children gathered to observe the Haggadah or Passover meal. We ate strange and wonderful foods that helped us remember the story of God setting his people free from slavery in Egypt and later setting all of us free from sin through Christ. I think one of the children who took part in that Seder meal could tell us what we did with water and a basin. Who can tell me?

That's right. At Passover, there was always at least one ritual of washing hands. If you've ever wondered where Jesus got that basin of water, there are two possibilities.

First, there was usually such a container at the entrance to a home so that feet could be washed upon entering the home. But if this were the container Jesus used, someone would have had to carry it upstairs--possible, but not really necessary given the second possibility.

More than likely, Jesus took the basin of water that had been used in the ceremonial washing of hands earlier in the meal. That basin would have been near the table where Jesus was sitting. Was Jesus cleansing the feet of those who would carry the good news?

The second scene, from Matthew 27, was set in **Jesus' trial before Pilate**. In that pivotal moment, Pilate was stuck between a rock and a hard place. The Jewish priests and elders were pressing him to execute a blasphemer known as Jesus of Nazareth. Yet Pilate did not believe Jesus had committed a capital offense. He did not see or hear anything threatening about Jesus; not even his claim to be king of the Jews.

From historical records, we know that Pilate, as a rule, had no trouble at all crucifying Jews. He killed them by the hundreds to discourage criminal and subversive activity. But Pilate was hesitant to execute Jesus and Pilate's wife added her own anxiety into the mix. Look at v. 19: ***While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, 'Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him.'***

If Pilate refused to execute Jesus, he would have a riot on his hands and many Jews would die. If he crucified an innocent man, it might be worse as his wife said. But it would be only one innocent death rather than many. This is the great irony of the cross. Pilate condemned one to save others which is exactly what God had in mind too.

Just like anyone else in a bind, Pilate looked for a way out. He found it in a ritual of washing.

When Sara and I were in England for the BWA meeting in 2005, we visited the city of **Bath** which grew up around a hot spring over which Rome had built a temple in 50AD. Roman baths were built by the hundreds across the kingdom and many of her citizens, especially the politically connected, spent a great deal of time in them. Maybe if our political leaders spent more time debating at the pools and saunas of a Roman bath, they would do a better job. You find many different pools and rooms in a Roman bath, but you also find ornate basins for the purpose of washing hands and feet.

It is almost certain that Pilate had been to these baths because they were the central place of political discourse. So he would have performed the ritual of hand washing at least in that setting. Romans, by and large, were very health conscious people.

I could find no data as to whether "washing hands" of an action in Roman culture ever had the meaning Pilate associated with it. It's quite possible that Pilate was sarcastically mimicking his Jewish subjects and their ritual hand-washing.

What actually did come out in the wash? Pilate thought it was his culpability. But when we get to v. 26 of our Matthew passage we read: ***So Pilate released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.*** I'm innocent of this man's blood, Pilate declared as he ordered Jesus to be beaten and then crucified. It certainly wasn't confession and repentance that came out in his wash.

A gun salesman was arrested last year because he didn't bother with background checks. He wanted to move merchandise. According to the article, he washed his hands of responsibility because whatever happened with that gun was on the one who used it. Did Pilate really think he could wash his hands of innocent blood while carrying out the action for which he wanted to be absolved? Did he really think he could shift the responsibility to the Jewish leaders and the Romans who actually drove the spikes in his hands and feet? Can you wash one hand while the other is pulling a trigger?

But isn't this the way of all humanity? We choose avoidance or denial when confession is needed; we think buying cheap goods here has nothing to do with sweat shops over there?

A woman gave her testimony in a SS class I was attending in a former congregation and she was very open about her past. She told about a party she went to as a college student. She knew it was going to be one of those wild parties and she was a Christian. But she had been

invited by some students she met at church, so she rationalized her way around the alarms going off in her head. As she was getting dressed for the party, she told us, she was already asking God to forgive her.

Note to self. When you're praying for forgiveness before you do something, pull over and stop the car. Don't proceed when alarm bells are going off in your heart. Of course, we've all heard that it's easier to ask for forgiveness than permission, but when it comes to our moral failures, it's not easy to ask for forgiveness at all.

Back to her testimony: she was saying that same prayer, God please forgive me, as she began to drink with all the others. With tears in her eyes, she said, and then I passed out; I don't even know what happened after that. She spent the next several years in shame, telling God how sorry she was but never believing she could be forgiven. No, for this woman it definitely wasn't easier to ask for forgiveness.

Yet she had finally come to the place of receiving God's grace and mercy; of forgiving herself. She finally allowed Jesus to wash her feet and this was demonstrated by the ways she was washing the feet of others. I came to see her testimony as a way to wash the feet of her class. She was stooping down below the strong and happy. Instead of trying to appear all together and bullet-proof, she called us to humility and service. **Something good came out of that wash.**

Two stories; two washings; two outcomes. **One led to service and the other to self-service.** In the upper room Jesus washed the feet of his dearest friends as a sign of hospitality and humility; as a sign of his command to do likewise. And these washed feet carried the good news that changed the world.

What came out in the washing of Pilate's hands? In Pilate's thinking, it was personal responsibility, but a closer look reveals that from his ritual came injustice; condemnation; fear; guilt and delusion.

When we look in the mirror, don't we see both? At times, aren't we are guilty of washing our hands of responsibility. Don't we refuse to get involved?

But thanks be to God, there is also some upper room washing going on in our congregation; the kind that creates servants. As we saw, many of you took basin and towel and washed the feet of some women in need this winter. Others of you are stooping down feed the hungry or visit the sick or share compassion with the bereaved. Still others labor tirelessly to serve those who are our guests here. Aren't we washing feet in the way of Jesus when our members go to a struggling school to tutor a child; when we clean tables or go to Hungary?

All of this is a sign that Jesus has washed not only our feet for service and mission, but has cleansed our lives for eternity. In the words of the hymn, it is the blood of Jesus that washes away our sin. And when we're washed in the blood, what comes out is life everlasting.

What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus. What can make me whole again? Nothing but the blood of Jesus. O precious is the flow that makes me white as snow; no other fount I know. Nothing but the blood of Jesus.