

Dave's Grace

John 13:1–17

Working draft

Good morning Church!

One of the most fortunate events in my life was living and playing baseball with 4 life-long friends: John, Mike, Jim and Dave. Here is a photo of us in 2013 – tailgating at a PSU game, which has helped keep us in touch for over 40 years. As I was preparing for delivering this sermon – my first ever – I was reminded of the time when I was preparing for a speech in a Persuasive Speaking class at Juniata (tell the story – 60 – 90 seconds).

I first met Dave Crane in the winter of 1983 – before we became roommates the following year. We were both trying out for the Juniata College baseball team. Near the end of tryouts, Dave and I were somehow the last two in the indoor practice room with our coach, Bill Berrier — AKA “The Bear.” We were both wondering if we’d made the team. As we were leaving, The Bear said, “You guys have nothing to worry about.” Dave and I looked at each other, and without saying a word, our expressions clearly shouted: “*Whew!*”

John, Mike, Jim and I collectively said goodbye to Dave, on June 6th, 2021. Dave died one week later on June 13th a victim of glioblastoma (brain cancer).

Shortly after Dave passed away, and before his funeral, he came to me in a dream — clearer than most of the waking moments I’ve lived and forgotten. It felt like a rare gift, a chance to learn something about the afterlife. So I

begged him: “*What are you seeing Dave? What is it like?*” Dave didn’t say a word. He just made a gesture. I’ll tell you what it was at the end of this sermon.

The dust and the slave

This fall our sermons have centered on spiritual practices, so today I want to speak to the practice of foot-washing and ask: *Is foot-washing a spiritual practice?* My experience-based guess is that most of us would say, “Uh ... not really.”

Some of you grew up like I did, in a fairly conservative Mennonite church. Once you were baptized, you were expected to take part in communion and footwashing twice a year. Did anyone ever wake up on one of those Sundays and say, “YES! We are washing feet today!” Show of hands?

Couldn’t we just eat the homemade bread, drink the grape juice, and skip all the foot stuff with that water that smelled like Clorox? And while we’re at it — which made you more uncomfortable: washing someone else’s feet, or letting them wash yours?

Hold onto your answer. Let’s go back two thousand years.

In Judea people wore open sandals on dirt roads shared with donkeys, goats, and everybody else’s animals. By the time you arrived anywhere, your feet weren’t just dusty - they were filthy and foul-smelling.

In a house with servants, washing feet was the job of the lowest-ranking slave. The rabbis listed tasks you shouldn’t impose on a fellow Israelite because they announced that one man was beneath another — and

footwashing belonged in that territory. To kneel and wash someone's feet was to say, with your body, *I am lower than you*.

So a respectable host didn't wash his guests' feet. He offered water. He provided the means; they washed their own feet or a low servant did it for them.

Our own inheritance

We Mennonites come from people who read John 13 and didn't consider foot-washing just a nice story or parable. In 1564, Dirk Philips listed washing the saints' feet among the marks of a true church. In 1632, at Dordrecht, our spiritual ancestors signed a confession saying footwashing was "instituted, enjoined and commanded."

That confession crossed the ocean. Germantown, just outside Philadelphia, was the first Mennonite settlement in America, founded in 1683. In 1712, a bishop there named Jacob Gottschalk had the Dordrecht Confession translated into English. Then in 1725, Gottschalk sat down with sixteen other Mennonite ministers from southeastern Pennsylvania — the first Mennonite conference ever held in this country — and they signed it. They wrote that they owned that confession *to be wholly ours*. For the next two centuries, it was the confession of Mennonites in America.

The other half of the text

I think half of John 13 has landed with us solidly. We understand the ones who kneel. We've built a whole ethic out of it — service, humility, stooping low — and we've got that part right.

But there are other figures in the room — the ones not holding the towel. They're the ones with bare feet and nowhere to hide. Maybe they feel undeserving ... or too proud ... or maybe they just don't like the way their feet look.

Peter's refusal

When Jesus was washing the feet of his disciples and gets to Peter, Peter says, *Lord, you're going to wash my feet?* Then, stronger: *You will never wash my feet.*

Peter knows who Jesus is and what it means for a man of standing to kneel at another man's feet, and everything in him says *"Nope, not gonna happen!"*

Jesus refuses his reverence, saying: *"If I don't wash you, you have no part with me."*

Then Peter swings the other way — *"Not just my feet, Lord, my hands and my head too!"* He's still managing the moment. Even his surrender wants to be on his own terms.

So what is Peter defending? Maybe a world where he's the one who steps up. Where he's never exposed, never indebted, never the one who needs something done for himself.

Dave

Back to Dave. Earlier in our Freshman year before we met at baseball try-outs, Dave lost his father to ... glioblastoma. Looking back, I think he was angry at the world — and who could blame him? That stretch brought one misfortune after another. During our first baseball season, for reasons never disclosed to me, Dave fired a glass Gatorade bottle at a tree. The tree fired it right back at him, splitting his bottom lip open. He sat out several baseball games with stitches and puffy, painful lips, and when we teased him about it, he'd say, weakly, "Don't make me laugh." Which of course made us laugh all the harder and Dave's mouth ache worse.

Dave was a great athlete — a high school hockey player, the best catcher I ever played with, and a golfer who usually beat me at match play and laughed heartily as his long putts dropped into the hole. We won the Toftrees Member-Guest together in 2018, the first and last time we were ever partners on the golf course. When he stayed with us for Penn State games, he'd often go for a five-mile run. None of us could keep up, so he went alone.

Dave was the life of the party, and somehow he always found the spotlight — kicking field goals on the field at a New York Jets game or playing bongos with Tommy Warehem at the Ale House. The seats I bought for Penn State football games were never good enough for Dave. He'd say, "I'm looking at those seats down by mid-field — I'll see you later." This meant after the game. Sitting in someone else's empty seats was part of the challenge for him. Dave worked hard and played hard his whole life.

In late February 2020, the five of us gathered in Happy Valley for a hockey game. It was our last gathering before the world changed. Two weeks later came the lockdown. Two months after that, Dave told us doctors had found a tumor in his brain.

Glioblastoma is aggressive, it doesn't usually give you much time, and the treatment — radiation, chemotherapy, month after month — is brutal in its own right.

And here is the first thing Dave did that I want you to notice. He got on the phone, and he called his friends, and he told us what was happening, and he asked us to help him.

I want to sit on that for a second, because I don't think we give it enough weight. Dave asked. He named what he needed out loud, to people who would then see him at his worst.

So we came.

We helped drive him from Yardley, PA to the University of Penn hospital for his radiation treatments. We helped make him meals and clean his house and organize his chemo pills and maintain his large yard. I was fortunate that I was working remotely at the time and could work from Dave's upstairs office and was given permission from my employer to take breaks in my day when I had to drive Dave to his treatments. I was able to spend an entire week with him in June of 2020, at the height of Covid, several Saturdays after that and then another full week the following January.

By the time of the January 2021 visit, Dave needed a lift chair badly — the kind that helps you stand up — so I suggested we go to a furniture store and find one. Several of us had decided that we would pay for it.

It was all he could do to get in and out of a few chairs on that showroom floor. But we found a chair he liked.

Dave said he couldn't pay for it. We told him we were taking care of it. And he let us — knowing full well he was never going to pay us back.

Two days later, Dave's son Russell and I picked up the chair and put it together in the family room. Later that afternoon I came downstairs from the office to check on Dave. He was out cold in that chair, a blanket pulled up to his chin.

I can't fully explain what that did to me. Nothing was fixed. He was still dying. But there he was, asleep, comfortable, in a chair he had let us give him.

Later that week, what he needed was help taking a shower. Dave was very unsteady walking by this time. I helped him get undressed and had to walk behind him holding onto his waist and guiding him to the shower. Once in the shower, he sat on a chair and was able to wash himself. When he was finished, I handed him a towel and he was able to dry his upper body, before we headed back to his bedroom. There he sat on the side of his bed and I knelt down ... took the towel ... and began drying his feet. I don't remember our conversation at that point — all I could think about was how surreal that moment was for me and that I felt uniquely prepared for it.

In John 13, verse 7, Jesus says to Peter something like: *"You don't understand what I'm doing now, but you will understand it later."*

I certainly didn't understand what I was doing at the age of 14, when I was drying another man's feet at Maple Grove Mennonite Church — but now — with Dave, it was sinking in — and deeply.

Whose grace was it?

I have reflected on that moment and many others during that very short year of Dave's fight with cancer.

Because Dave — the tough, self-sufficient guy who worked hard and played harder, who loved a challenge, who ran 5 miles 3 times every week — allowed a friend to see him with nothing on and nothing left. He handed over his dignity and trusted me not to drop it.

And he could not pay any of it back. He knew that. He knew it every single time one of us showed up, and he let us love him anyway.

I did the easy part.

The humility and trust he showed was not mine. It was his. I got to be useful, which is a thing I know how to be and frankly enjoy. He had to be helpless, in front of someone who would remember it.

In “The Servant Song”, which we often sing when performing foot-washing, the second stanza of the first verse is *“Pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant too.”*

This was Dave's grace.

Why being served is harder

There's a sermon near the end of Norman Maclean's book, *A River Runs Through It*. The narrator's father is a Presbyterian minister in Montana, and he preaches it after his youngest son, Paul, has been beaten to death in an ally — a son he loved and could never reach.

Each one of us here today will at one time in our lives look upon a loved one who is in need and ask the same question: We are willing to help, Lord, but what, if anything, is needed? For it is true we can seldom help those closest to us. Either we don't know what part of ourselves to give or, more often than not, the part we have to give is not wanted. And so it is those we live with and should know who elude us. But we can still love them — we can love completely without complete understanding.

— Norman Maclean, *A River Runs Through It*

We can ask ourselves “*What do I have? What can I offer? Am I enough?*”

It's a question only the other person can answer.

Paul never answered it. That's the grief of that whole book — a family standing around a young man with their hands open, and him meeting a violent end without ever telling them what he needed. His father says, near the end, that we can love completely without complete understanding. That's the consolation you're left with when the other person won't identify their need.

Dave acted.

He picked up the phone and told his friends what was needed. And we came and we helped according to the need and we were happy and blessed to do it.

This is not a small task.

Serving keeps us competent. It keeps us generous, needed, in charge. There is a kind of humility that is actually a quiet form of power — I stoop, but I stoop on my own schedule, and I stand back up whenever I want.

Being served doesn't let you do that. It asks three things that we are not good at:

Exposure. Somebody sees what you keep covered.

Dependence. You have to admit out loud that you can't do this yourself.

And letting the ledger go. You cannot repay it. You have to sit there, in debt, and let that stand.

Dave did this to perfection and it is how he will be remembered — far beyond the other achievements in his life — he left us a legacy and an example to follow.

Our Hope

I told you I would come back to the dream.

The part where I was imploring “*What are you seeing Dave? What is it like?*”

And Dave didn't say anything. Once again, we were just looking at each other...

He lifted his hand, and he tapped the left side of his chest. Twice.

(Pause)

At the end of *The Shawshank Redemption*, the narrator, Red, is on a bus headed south, going to find his friend, Andy. These are the last words of the story:

I hope I can make it across the border. I hope to see my friend and shake his hand. I hope the Pacific is as blue as it has been in my dreams. I hope.

— Stephen King, Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption / Frank Darabont, The Shawshank Redemption

With that final gesture, Dave gave me hope. Hope that we can ask for and receive help in our times of need. Hope that love for each other will see us through uncertain and dangerous times and that soon - very soon - we will be reunited with our brothers and sisters who we miss dearly.

Let's hope. Amen.
