

A rare, uncomfortable ritual

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Tonight is the one service of the year in which many churches practice footwashing. Others don't do it at all, despite the fact that after washing Peter's feet Jesus [says](#), "You also ought to wash one another's feet."

Perhaps we're uncomfortable with the intimacy of the act and the humility required to be served by our fellow believers. When I serve another person, I feel like a good Christian who loves her neighbor. When someone else serves me, I am reminded that I am no better than anyone else.

Like Peter—we are so often like Peter—we are taken aback that a Christian brother or sister would wash our feet. Had Jesus commanded, "Peter, wash my feet," I suspect Peter would have done it gladly. But the other way around?

I experienced something like Peter's surprise when I was 18 and studying in Nazareth, Ethiopia. I was staying with a family, members of the Mennonite church body there, and I was beginning to learn about power dynamics between churches in the global North and those in the global South.

When I arrived at the family's home, I had walked about a mile on the dusty Nazareth streets wearing sandals. As I stepped into the home, my host sister, Hannah, invited me in and asked me to sit down. She brought out a basin of water, and I noticed that the dust had covered my feet. "She must be upset at the mess I'm making, and want me to clean my feet," I thought, embarrassed.

Hannah explained that she would be honored to wash my feet. I tried to protest. I wanted to show my respect for Ethiopians as my equals; they didn't have to serve me. But she insisted, and washed not only my feet, but also my legs. She demonstrated, in the most powerful way, that she was my equal as a Christian sister.

Our congregation shares a building with two other congregations. On World Communion Sunday, the three churches worshiped together. The Church of the Brethren congregation has traditionally done footwashing on that particular Sunday. When the other worship planners and I told our Mennonite congregation that this would be part of the service, we received mixed reactions. Some were excited, others confused. Some said they would not participate. This from Mennonites, who often elevate service above other virtuous acts.

We decided to include handwashing stations for those who preferred the less intimate practice. In the end, most of the worshipers from our congregation did not participate. It was humbling for me to be unable to persuade more congregants to take part in this powerful Christian act of love for one another.

What stops us from receiving the blessing Christ says we will receive if we do as he did to Peter?