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The Beauty of Bathing – John 13:12-16

So, last Saturday, we finally used the fire pit in our backyard. We've only been in the house for six years, so it's high time we made use of it, you know?

I had a lot of small branches I'd trimmed from the various trees in the yard, some scraps of 2x4, etc., so I told the kids we'd have a backyard campfire. Ran down to the store, picked up some newly-declared-carcinogenic hot dogs, some hot dog buns, and potato chips, came home, and got a nice fire going just as dusk settled.

We had a great time out on the back patio. Haven't used it too much, either, since it's brutally hot in the summer and doesn't have much of a view, but it was perfect for an evening like this. Sadie and Seth had a ball poking sticks around – mostly mesquite and palo verde.

Then it was time to start cooking. The kids said Mom would be out for a marshmallow when we got done with our dinner (she can't eat hot dogs or that much bread, so we gave her a pass on the cookout part).

That's when I realized I'd forgotten to buy the marshmallows. So, I told the kids to hold the fort, and ran back down to the store. By the way, have you ever tried to find marshmallows in a grocery store? I've had more than my share of searching time over the years until that very day, when it occurred to me that they are in the same aisle as the sugar. Well, duh.

The marshmallows were not ideal. They'd come in to the store on one of those days we had a couple weeks ago when it was good and hot, and they were a bit, shall we say, chummy with one another, but I had no choice, got them, and ran 'em home.

Finally, hot dogs, potato chips, a mesquite campfire, and kids. It was a great evening. Then Mom came out, we broke out the marshmallows, pried them apart as best we could, and played the ageless game of toasting versus burning, caramelized versus carbonizing sugar, learned what happens when a marshmallow starts dripping, but mostly spent way too much time trying to separate one marshmallow from the others and the bag.

Now, the back patio at our place is off the living room. You have to go through a standard door with a doorknob.

This is important because of what happens when you turn a doorknob after using your fingers to separate stuck-together marshmallows: the residual sugary gook you have on your fingers

(which you're headed back inside to wash off, by the way) – that gook ends up on the doorknob, lying in wait for the next unwary entrant.

It wasn't until I headed in for the night that I realized not just that that unintended marshmallow coating consequence was there, but how thick it was. Yuk.

And therein lies the beauty of bathing. Or, you might say in this case, the wonder of washing, since that sugary goop came off pretty easily – although I do wonder how much of it managed to get so far.

Our passage of Scripture comes from a part of Maundy Thursday – the night of Jesus' last supper with his disciples and final betrayal – that we often neglect, because even though Diane preached a sermon not long after she joined us on the beauty of the feet of those who preach the Good News, not too many of us are real comfy with washing each other's feet, or having someone wash ours. I myself have managed to successfully avoid this act all but twice in my thirty-odd years of ministry; I suspect most of you have never actually participated in it.

Face it, most feet are best kept in shoes. That's why God made shoes.

But in Jesus' day, it was part of the hospitality of a well-kept home to take care of your guests by washing the dirt off their feet, the inevitable result of walking even in sandals on bare ground. Jesus washed his disciples' feet to display the humility and servant-oriented

nature of what God does in and through him, and that foot-washing remains a deeply moving image of just how much God loves us.

If you remember, Jesus tells the disciples that they're clean, except for their feet. Those feet have tramped through streets that are nowhere near as clean even as our modern ones: full of, well, filth and stuff. Feet are not considered particularly attractive for this reason alone, and you probably know that even today throwing a shoe at someone is considered a truly awful insult in the Middle East.

So what do feet and doorknobs have in common, and what does this have to do with us?

It has to do with sin, and human nature.

You see, Jesus Christ came to us because God still cares for us, even after the sad history that is the first part of our Bible, the Old Testament, or better, the Old Covenant or the Hebrew Scriptures. In this pre-Christ part of our Bible, we see God reaching out to the humanity he's created, loving it, coaxing it back to himself over and over again. And humanity – with a few very important exceptions – collectively shrugs its shoulders and turns away.

Turns away and even glories in rejecting its creator, its true love, literally, its salvation. Time and again, God sends special representatives, prophets, leaders, to bring them back. Sometimes they do come back, for a while; but they always turn away.

Finally, much as in Jesus' parable of the ungrateful tenants, God sent his only son, only this time not as a last resort, hoping that the creatures he created to care for this planet and each other would respect the messenger as in the parable, but because God knew they wouldn't. God knew, and planned for, their rejection of Jesus.

And the son, Jesus the Christ, did more than just plead the father's case, just and blameless as it was and is; the son set an example for us to follow, then gave us his birthright so that we could be set free from sin.

But, even set free from sin, we are not set free from being human. Being human is a wonderful thing, it's God's own creation.

And in that, it's kind of like a certain human creation that God surely had a hand (or a whisper of the Spirit) in creating: marshmallows.

Humans are wonderful things. So are marshmallows.

Marshmallows are great. They're fun. They're essential to s'mores, to Jell-O salads, to all sorts of silly things. They're also sweet, a wonderful treat – that, let's be honest, isn't very good for you, but still brings a smile, a laugh, a tickle of the tongue to even such jaded, cynical, down-to-earth people as ourselves.

So, Jesus' washing away of the road dirt on their feet that was an inescapable part of his disciples joining him in that upper room (since they had to walk to get there), his telling them that they were clean

except for one part, their feet, was a little like telling them that they were sweet treats for their creator, and he was just cleaning them up so they'd be bright and shiny before God.

And cleaning up the sticky residue of those marshmallows off of the doorknob was restoring order after a lot of very human, very sweet fun – inspired by the creator of happiness, God. A bit of tidying up, because in Christ we are forgiven, but that doesn't mean we haven't lost the sticky parts of being human, or the sweet parts, either, which, honestly, sometimes end up being sticky and sinful.

It just takes a little of God's living water, a little humility, a little touch-up to make us a bit closer to the good, sweet part of humanity that God has saved.

Jesus' foot-washing was followed by a meal, a meal which they well may not have tasted because of the weight of the events they could feel pressing in on them in that upper room. A meal which, in spirit, we share with them, with all the faithful on this All Souls' Day, now.

It's sweet, too. Let it wash you clean, at least for now. Let it bring out the sweetness in you, for others, for Christ.