

## **Dirty Feet!**

By Scott Runyon

FBCB

Sept 3, 2017

John 12:1-8

On December 14, 2008 President George W. Bush was holding a press conference at the Prime Minister's Palace in Baghdad, Iraq. During his speech, an angry Iraqi journalist took off both of his shoes and launched them at Bush, who ducked to avoid being hit. The journalist was tackled by another journalist and kicked, then was carried off and put in jail for assaulting a foreign head of state.

The journalist was making a statement of insult toward Bush using his very own shoes.

The journalist could have tossed a pen. He could have picked up a book to throw, or reporters' notepad, or any number of items. But he chose to launch his shoes.

It was significant because shoes in the Middle East are a symbol of uncleanness because they are close to the ground and on what is considered the lowest and dirtiest part of the body, the feet.

Being exposed to a shoe, and especially the sole of a shoe in that culture is insulting and being hit by a shoe would mean that a person is considered even lower than the foot — adding even more insult.

In the Middle East people are so sensitive about feet that it is considered rude to cross an ankle over a knee to expose the sole of a shoe to anyone in the room.

Their views about the cleanliness of shoes are what have Muslims remove their shoes before praying or before entering a Mosque. In Luke 9, when Jesus sent out his 12 disciples to minister in the surrounding towns and villages, he told them to go and preach the good news and if the people in a town didn't accept it, what did he tell them to do? He told them to shake the dust off their feet as a testimony against them.

In the next chapter, Jesus sent out 72 disciples giving them similar instructions. If they were not made welcome, he told them to,

*“go into its streets and say, ‘Even the dust of your town we wipe from our feet as a warning to you.’”*

Feet and shoes in Middle Eastern culture in Jesus' day and right up to

the current day are seen as very unclean. Now keep that in mind as you listen to our scripture for today.

### **Read John 12:1-8**

Notice how Mary poured the expensive perfumed oil on Jesus' feet.

Not only this, but the passage says that she also let down her hair. For a woman to let down her hair was, in our day, like a woman hiking up her dress to the upper thighs in public.

People in the room would certainly take notice and likely feel not a little bit uncomfortable.

Then she used her own hair to wipe Jesus' feet. Remember what feet represent. What a humbling act!

In this scene, perhaps the only one not uncomfortable was Jesus who honored her act of humility and service. Mary was ministering to Jesus at a time when he needed it most.

At this point, Jesus was a man with a target on his back. Religious leaders were accusing him falsely. They were trying to trap him and discredit him. They were making plans to get rid of him. He was on

the run and knew that his time was limited.

To say that he was in need of some support is perhaps an understatement.

Who was there to give him support? It wasn't the disciples whom he called to learn from him in his inner circle. Even though he had told all his disciples what was coming, they didn't quite understand what was going down in Jerusalem.

No, it was Mary who had listened and understood that Jesus was heading to his death. She came to attend to him in his hour of need.

She was doing what none of the other disciples were willing to acknowledge. Perhaps they were too proud. Perhaps they were stuck thinking that Jesus was going to take over political rule from the Romans.

So here was Mary letting down her hair, opening up this expensive perfume that filled the house with its aroma. Then she bent down in great humility to wipe Jesus' feet with her hair.

I can imagine everyone in the room stopped.

I can see Martha, dutifully taking care of serving everyone in the room. She looked up and stopped mid-way through wiping down a counter. Perhaps she thought that Mary had gone off the deep end this time.

And I can see Lazarus, Peter and Thomas, along with the other disciples sitting around the table with half-eaten pieces of flatbread in their hands, and their mouths full simply stop in the silence as everyone turns to look at Mary.

I can see them stop chewing and stare in amazement as olive oil drips off the flatbread onto the table. What was Mary doing now?

Everyone was thinking it, but only Judas was willing to speak up and challenge what Mary was doing. Even though his challenge had ulterior motives, we have to suspend those for a minute. Jesus and the disciples trusted Judas. He was part of the inner circle. When he spoke they listened.

We have to see that Judas made a good point about the value of the perfume Mary was using and how many poor it could feed.

We might have felt the same way. It was very expensive perfume! In

today's equivalent it would be worth about \$50,000! How many poor people in the land could be helped with that kind of money? A lot!

And caring for the poor was a high priority for Jesus and his small band of followers. Judas' job among the disciples was to keep track of the money, pay for the things they needed and then also find a way to support the poor. So, it made sense that he would raise that issue.

We could see the scene as a showdown between Mary and Judas.

Judas' point was that the perfume was expensive and being responsible to stretch it as far as it could go to feed the poor was more important than pouring it on Jesus' feet.

Mary's point was that was more important to honor Jesus and demonstrate her support for him considering his current predicament, and also prepare Jesus' body for burial.

Both Judas and Mary had good points. If you were there, who would you have supported, Judas or Mary?

Perhaps you would have been one of the disciples who just sat there in astonishment and waited for Jesus to say something, or to see how things would play out.

After Judas' challenge, Jesus did speak, and like so many times before, he honored the action of the one who was considered the least among them, someone who acted in love, faithfulness, and compassion, one who acted in great humility — Mary.

What Mary did is an example for us. She leaned in with tender vulnerability and listened for what was really going on with Jesus. She connected with Jesus at a deep level in his time of need. She was willing to humiliate herself for Jesus' greater good.

Mary was willing to become less in order for Jesus to become more.

For Mary this only made sense, because she wasn't thinking about what she would get out of the deal, like two other disciples who were looking to sit on Jesus' left and right when he became king.

No, Mary wasn't thinking of herself, only about what she might do to show love.

Mary wanted to show Jesus how she valued him, not at his eulogy after his death, but to his face while he was still alive and with them.

In fact, perhaps more than the more prominent disciples who were men, Mary was following Jesus more faithfully. She was loving and ministering to Jesus in the same way that he had loved and ministered to her — in humility considering the other more important than herself.

This is also the example Jesus left for us in his extravagant self-giving trip to the cross.

What extravagant, humble, self-giving love can you show for someone in need?

Your homework for this next week, should you choose to accept it, is to look out beyond yourself — to show unconditional love and care for someone else without concern for how it might benefit you or how you might be perceived by others.

Right now we have altogether too much pride, ego, threats of looming war in this world.

What Jesus calls us to is not about ego and looking good to other people. This is about creating a

world of peace and humility one act  
at a time.

So your work is to engage in a  
selfless act of grace and love for  
another, and then to keep doing  
that as a lifestyle. May God bless  
you in this work.