

John's story of Jesus washing his disciples' feet takes place in the context of his farewell to his disciples and his preparation for arrest and crucifixion. It is before the festival of Passover, and they are together for supper. Because roads were dusty and people wore sandals, it was customary to wash your own feet before a meal. If anybody did it for you, it was a slave, probably a female slave. But people of Jesus' class generally washed their own feet. Thus it's surprising and off-putting for Jesus, the authority figure in this group, to take off his outer robe, grab a towel, and begin to wash the disciples' feet.

Simon Peter, of course, is the one bold enough to challenge him, saying, essentially, "I will not accept this role reversal from my revered teacher." But he does, and when Jesus finishes, he tells the whole group, "I *am* your Lord and Teacher, and if I've washed your feet, then you also ought to wash each other's feet." This was not a simple role reversal, as at Carnival when peasants act like kings and vice-versa. This was an enactment of the upside-down values of the kingdom of God, in which the most leaderly thing to do *is* to serve others. Jesus is not pretending for the moment that he is not their Lord and Teacher; he's enacting the role of Lord and Teacher by serving his disciples. And he tells them, "For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you." They are to be the kind of leaders who serve.

This year *USA Today* is doing a retrospective series about the year 1968, a year of upheaval and violence that continues to resonate today. That was the year that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated, on April 4. That was the year that Robert Kennedy was assassinated, on June 6. That was the year that the Democratic

National Convention was rocked by violence, when the sitting president, Lyndon Johnson, chose not to run for office again, and when Richard Nixon was elected president of the United States.

The upheaval of 1968 had been brewing for years. The Vietnam War was increasingly unpopular, which made the draft and the government unpopular. The civil rights movement had been challenging social mores for some years, with the Voting Rights Act and repeal of segregation laws among its victories. In 1964, some protesters jumped into a whites-only swimming pool at a motel in St. Augustine, FL, and the motel owner poured acid into the pool to scare them into getting out. We now have archival footage of President Johnson reacting, saying, "Our whole foreign policy and everything else could go to hell over this. Yesterday in the swimming pool in St. Augustine they started pouring acid in the pool." One of the protesters, J.T. Johnson, said on reflection that he wasn't sure the Civil Rights Act would have been passed had it not been for this pool protest.

Nineteen sixty-eight was also the year that a new children's show was born, *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. Fred Rogers produced this deceptively simple show whose premise was that each child watching was his "television neighbor," and together he and his neighbors inquired into phenomena like the emptying of aquariums (of deep interest to people who are learning to regulate their bladders) and what we can do with the mad that we feel. He was a Presbyterian minister and attended church in Pittsburgh (where he was in the rotation for nursery duty, how great is that?), and one Sunday heard the magnificent voice of Francois Clemmons, then an opera singer in Pittsburgh and later the founder and director of the Harlem

Spiritual Ensemble. Fred Rogers asked Francois Clemmons if he would join the neighborhood as Officer Clemmons, making him the first African American to have a recurring role on a kids' TV series. Oh, also he is gay, and was out to Fred Rogers, so there's that.

Clemmons remembers when Rogers suggested the idea: "That kind of stopped me in my tracks. I grew up in the ghetto. I did not have a positive opinion of police officers. Policemen were sicking police dogs and water hoses on people. And I really had a hard time putting myself in that role. So I was not excited about being Officer Clemmons at all." But he gave it a try.

In 1969, on the five-year anniversary of the pool protest in St. Augustine, it was a hot day in Mister Rogers' neighborhood. It was so hot, in fact, that Mister Rogers was sitting with his feet in a kiddie pool, keeping cool. When Officer Clemmons happened along, Mister Rogers invited him to come over and rest his feet in the water alongside him. White feet and brown feet rested together in the pool, and the camera rested on them. When Officer Clemmons needed to move on, Mister Rogers took a towel and dried his feet methodically for him. He said, *Sometimes just a minute like this, will really make a difference.* And Francois Clemmons says now, "I think he was making a very strong statement. That was his way. I still was not convinced that Officer Clemmons could have a positive influence in the neighborhood and in the real world neighborhood, but I think I was proven wrong."

Love, as Jesus teaches it, is more than feeling; it is a policy. Think about Fred Rogers, minding his own business, producing a TV show for young children. But it's the 1960s and those children are not growing up in a vacuum. He must have asked

himself, How can my show be an instrument of God's love in this context? And it was not only to talk about how we feel if our parents divorce and learn how crayons are manufactured. It was also to give children a powerful image, an image of white feet and brown feet resting together in a single pool, and an image of a white person tending respectfully to a brown person. In a year when *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* was cancelled for being too controversial, Mister Rogers was brave and bold to be so loving—to follow the example that Jesus had set for his disciples. And you know what? Even now, 50 years later, I *feel* really loved by Fred Rogers because he went to all that trouble for his television neighbor. Don't you? It makes me want to go and do likewise.

Let us pray: Holy Lord God,

Jesus washed the disciples' feet as a sign of service and compassion. Show us how to live and love in service and with compassion, for the sake of all your children. Amen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JRxpLJKbNzc>