

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our heart be acceptable in your sight, O God. You are our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

In the summers, I occasionally teach canoeing and kayaking classes.

Often, the students are kids who haven't been in a boat before, who don't know anything about paddling, and who might be a little scared. They usually come in their swimsuits, knowing that they're likely to get wet.

And since they're expecting to get wet, they bring a towel to dry off.

These nervous, inexperienced kids want to bring their towels into the boat with them. They think they're going to fall out of their boat, so they want to be able to dry off once they do. It takes a little explaining before they understand... if they fall out of their boat, their towel is probably falling out also. And it won't do them any good if it's in the lake with them.

For students who are stepping out of their comfort zone, the towel is like a security blanket that they just don't want to give up. They think that having it close will make them more comfortable. So it takes a lot of convincing to get these kids to leave their towels on dry land where they'll be waiting when they get out of their boats.

And, of course, most of the students manage to get through the entire class without tipping over anyway, and they've forgotten about their security towel by the end... but they would never have believed that at the start of the class.

There's a popular science fiction book that has some very strong statements about towels. *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* is a bestseller by Douglas Adams, which was also turned into a movie about 10 years ago.

The premise of the story is basically that a guy named Arthur Dent is whisked off the planet Earth just before it's destroyed, by his friend who – unbeknownst to Author – is actually an alien working on the newest version of the galactic bestseller, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. If you decide to travel the galaxy by hitchhiking, this guide will tell you which planets to visit and which to avoid, details about various alien species, and what essentials you'll need for your travels.

According to *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, a towel “is about the most massively useful thing an interstellar hitchhiker can have. Partly it has great practical value...” and it goes on to describe how you might use a towel on a half dozen different planets.

“More importantly,” the book continues, “a towel has immense psychological value. For some reason, if a strag (strag: nonhitchhiker) discovers that a hitchhiker *has* his towel with him, he will automatically assume that he is also in possession of a toothbrush, washcloth, soap, tin of biscuits, flask, compass, map, ball of string, gnat spray, wet-weather gear, space suit etc., etc.

Furthermore, the strag will then happily lend the hitchhiker any of these or a dozen other items that the hitchhiker might have accidentally "lost". What the strag will think is that any man that can hitch the length and breadth of the Galaxy, rough it, slum it, struggle against terrible odds, win through and still know where his towel is, is clearly a man to be reckoned with." https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/The_Hitchhiker%27s_Guide_to_the_Galaxy

From canoe outings with kids to galactic hitchhiking, truly, a towel has great psychological value.

A towel also has great symbolic value.

You can find towels with monograms on them, indicating who the owner is – and by extension, whose bathroom you're in.

If you have creative friends, you can end up getting towels as a wedding gift that say XX and XY, or ones with silhouettes of Princess Leia and Han Solo telling one another "I love you... I know."

The purpose is the same. The towel is a symbol for the person who uses it.

In church, we use towels regularly, and we even give them away.

Every time that someone is baptized, their head is dried with a small towel, embroidered with a cross. The newly baptized person gets to take that tiny towel home with them. It's a reminder of their baptism, and of their new identity in Christ. It's a gift from the church, and so it also symbolizes their belonging to this community.

The towel is white, to represent the purity of having your sins forgiven. In the ancient church, the newly baptized person was actually given a white robe to wear, to symbolize their sins being washed away in baptism. That's why white robes are still used by worship leaders – they are reminiscent of the ancient baptismal rite. That same meaning is now imparted through the simple white towel, embroidered with a cross. In baptism our sins are forgiven, and we are made clean.

A sign of forgiveness and belonging, and a reminder of baptism. That is one powerful towel.

A towel can also be a symbol of service.

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus ties a towel around his waist, washes the disciples' feet, and dries them with the towel.

It was the act of a servant.

In the culture of Jesus and the disciples and the earliest Christians, it was common for a person to wash their feet upon entering a house. Like we take off our shoes in winter time, so as not to track snow and salt across the house, the people of ancient

Israel would have removed their sandals and washed their feet, so as not to track sand and dust around the house.

Sometimes, there would be a person available to wash your feet when you arrived at a house. If you were rich enough to afford servants or slaves, or your host was, that person would greet you at the door with a towel and a basin of water. Everyone had to wash their feet or have them washed before partaking of any meal in that home.

This is why it was such a big deal when the woman washed Jesus' feet. You've heard the story before – it shows up in all four of the Gospels. The most detailed version of the story is in Luke, chapter 7.

Jesus accused his host of not offering him basin and towel before he sat at the table, and this was a breach of etiquette. Then this woman came in and washed Jesus' feet, and anointed them with expensive oil. Though the host considered her actions to be inappropriate, this woman was actually fulfilling the host's role that he had neglected, by ensuring that Jesus' feet were washed. She was also fulfilling the servants' role by being the one to actually do the washing.

When a servant was available, she or he would wash the feet of everyone entering a house, in that dusty environment where everyone wore sandals.

Though the servant wouldn't sit at the table with you, they would make possible your participation in the meal.

The foot-washer was an integral part of ancient Judean society. Professor Cláudio Carvalhaes from McCormick Theological Seminary says, "Usually a nameless slave was the one who made meals possible, exactly like our societies today where the poor, the undocumented, the marginalized are the ones who harvest our food, who clean our houses, who do all of the hidden services of our society so we can have the things that make our lives happen." http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2802

The servant was the one who carried the towel, who washed another's feet, and who made possible the lifestyles of those who employed or enslaved them.

By taking up the towel in today's Bible story, Jesus takes up the role of a servant or slave, and he is the one who makes the meal possible.

And, as you would expect of a servant or slave, Jesus washes the feet of everyone without distinction, as though they were all better than him.

He washes the feet of Judas, who betrays him.

He washes the feet of Peter, who denies him.

He washes the feet of the rest of the disciples, who abandon him – with the exception of his mother and John and several of the other women.

By wrapping the towel around his waist, Jesus dons the tool of servanthood, and he proceeds to fulfill that role for those who share the Passover meal with him.

In First Corinthians, Paul recounts this meal with a description of how Jesus shares the bread and wine. Certainly this part of the meal is significant – it is the meal that our sacrament of Communion commemorates, each time we celebrate it together. The bread and the wine are related to the first Passover, as the reading from Exodus reminds us – to that day when the Israelites finally gained their freedom from Pharaoh and were guaranteed safe passage out of Egypt... though even with that promise, they knew they had to hurry, lest the promise be rescinded.

The meal that Jesus shared with his disciples has become one of the signs of our faith, and one of the sacraments of our Christian life together. The meal is of immeasurable importance.

But do not forget the footwashing.

When Jesus washed the feet of the disciples, he took up the security blanket, the essential travel item, the symbol of forgiveness, and the sign of servitude – he wrapped a towel around himself, took the form of a servant, and he filled the most thankless role in society.

Think about it.

The CNA who changes the diapers of residents in the memory care unit of the nursing home.

The garbage collector who picks up the things that we want to throw away.

The busboy, or whatever the gender-neutral term for that role is, who picks up our napkins and leftovers and dishes when we go out to eat.

The custodian, who cleans up our messes.

The seasonal worker, who picks our produce or plows our streets or mows our lawns.

That is the role that Jesus voluntarily assumed. That is where he asks you to find him.

Don't look for Jesus in the powerful people in the world.

Don't look for those who already have security or transportation or assurance of their own righteousness.

Don't look to the host, but to the surprising servant.

Look for those who are scared, seeking refuge.

Look for those who are hitchhiking, or who could use a helping hand.

Find the people who have been told their whole lives that they are worthless – or, at least, that they are *worth less* than the majority population in their community.

That is where you will find Jesus.

Our savior is among us, in the places we least expect to find him. Jesus is with the powerless and marginalized, the servants and slaves.

Jesus has a towel wrapped around his waist. And he is waiting to serve us.

And Jesus is waiting for us to offer to serve one another.

So today, as we remember the servanthood of Jesus, I ask each of you to find ways to serve your neighbor, and to acknowledge the ways in which your neighbor already serves you.

Show gratitude to one another.

And don't be afraid to pick up your towel and follow Jesus.

Amen.