

A Footwashing Liturgy

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Meditation: A Call to the Basin and the Towel

Twice, at least, Jesus had allowed his own feet to be anointed.

Mary, sister of Lazarus and Martha, had just recently anointed his feet, overwhelmed at the wonder of her brother's release from death's decay. The account is in John 12. Despite Judas' disingenuous protest at such a robbing of the poor, Jesus had accepted the gesture. The anointing was not in competition with care for the poor; moreover, its pungent fragrance must have evoked the smell of burial spices for him. Three times, at least by the Synoptic reckoning, he had sought to prepare the disciples for his departure by death, and they simply failed to "get it" — now he insists that the olfactory foreshadowing be allowed to stand: "Let her alone, let her keep it for the day of my burial. The poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me" (Jn 12:7-8).

Earlier, according to Luke 7, he had allowed a similar anointing of his feet, that time, however, at the hands of a notoriously sinful woman. That time, because of the host's — Simon, the Pharisee — lack of hospitality, Jesus' feet had to be prepared for the anointing. For the host's water, the woman supplied her own tears; the towel the host should have provided she replaced with her hair; and for Simon's self-righteous aloofness she substituted her kisses. Jesus' allowing such public intimate touching from one probably known as being too free with her intimacies — well, it must have been shocking. And it is not hard to see why it would have made some folks grumpy. But this was the moment Jesus had revealed, in the cryptic terms of a proverb he had just used (check out Luke 7:32 when you can): No, he had not come to sing a prophetic jeremiad and to howl at how awful sinners were. Instead, he had come to start the dance of deliverance for gluttons, drunks, tax collectors and sinners; and the "righteous people" should have been playing their flutes to accompany his dance — Gomer's husband was back; he was going to make of his violated beloved a fresh and pure virgin, and he was going to have his nuptial dance with her. "Her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little." And he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven" (Lk 7:47-48).

Jesus' willingness to receive extravagant affection from these two women says a lot. Among them is this: it is not inappropriate for those whose lives have been wrecked and ruined by sin, but then gloriously and wonderfully bought back and restored, to be extravagant in their praise — extravagant in their art, extravagant in their architecture, extravagant in their music.

I hope you can enjoy that kind of extravagance with me.

John 13 calls us to another kind of extravagance too — here Jesus acts out a parable of his extravagance towards us. You don't have to be a theological genius — nor, alternatively, do you have to fear being exegetically hyperactive — to see the parallel between John 13 and Philippians 2. There is to Jesus' taking up of the servant's towel a picturing of what his whole career has been: a laying aside of divine prerogatives to become a servant to us — to wash us from head to foot, from outside to inside, to clean places we didn't even know were there, much less that they were dirty. Deity had bonded itself to humanity; majesty had humbled itself to be born in our likeness; infinite power had tethered itself to the way of obedience; pomp had yielded to the circumstance of our desperate need, “even to death on a cross.”

Os Guinness once observed: “No other god has wounds but the Christian God.” In the humility of his incarnation and in the abject humiliation of the crucifixion for which he was preparing his disciples in this act of footwashing (to paraphrase Guinness), “Jesus so identified himself with men and women and the depths of their agony and shame and guilt, that no one can now sink so low that God has not gone lower” (somewhere in *The Dust of Death*).

Implicit in the footwashing is the picture of his redeeming love.

Explicit is his call to us to do for one another what he has done for us: “You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor the one sent greater than the sender. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them” (Jn 13:14-17). Further, he puts it in terms of the new stipulation of the covenant his blood is about to seal: “A new commandment I give to you, namely, that you love one another — just as I have loved you, so you love one another. By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn 13:34-35).

The consensus of the historical church is that Jesus did not intend the act of footwashing as a sacrament alongside communion and baptism. That's probably mostly because of its singularity in John's narrative. Still, it is to be noticed that while John doesn't ever give us a Lord's Supper as such, he comments on it throughout his gospel (see esp. chap. 6). The meal at which Jesus washes his disciples' feet stands in the very place of the Lord's Supper, and itself stands as a remarkable commentary both on the fellowship that that meal symbolizes, as well as on its role in our ongoing cleansing and sanctification.

As it is, the act of footwashing serves the historical church more as an occasional reminder of what we are all about:

- Footwashing is a profound picture of the whole project of incarnation — nowhere else is the parabola of Jesus' “stooping low” to raise sinners more graphically portrayed;

- Moreover, to me, Jesus’ washing of his disciples’ feet is a compelling picture of our need for his ongoing ministry to renew and cleanse us. Though, like Peter who comes to the meal already bathed, we have been completely been washed, and therefore don’t ever need a rebaptism; we nonetheless get our feet dirty, and, as humiliating as it is, we need to admit the situation and accept the ongoing cleansing work of Jesus through the Holy Spirit — we remain sinners in need of grace, and thus our baptism needs to be renewed over and over again;
- For the apostle Paul, “washing the feet of the saints” became shorthand for a lifestyle of meeting the needs of others. In Paul’s list of qualifications for “enrolled widows,” the phrase “washing the feet of the saints” stands between “receiving strangers” and “relieving the afflicted” — the objects of service are different: “strangers, saints, and the afflicted”, but the same heart is expressed to all: a spirit of humble self-giving (see 1 Timothy 5:10).

At the same time, Jesus did say of the act of footwashing: “If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you” (Jn 13:14-15).

Today, let the physical act of washing one another’s feet and allowing your own feet to be washed remind you of:

- Jesus’ profound condescension to your humble estate — you were lost, and he clothed himself in your frail and polluted humanity to befriend, cleanse, and ennoble you;
- his ongoing work in you to sanctify, renew, and empower you; and
- the radical claim of the gospel on our lives. We are called to a cruciform life: with one hand, taking hold ourselves of the cross that saves, and with the other, taking hold of one another, so that we become the link between God’s life and one another’s fears, loneliness, and pain. Having received his forgiveness, we extend it to others. Having our warfare against him ended by the gospel of reconciliation, we become peacemakers and ambassadors of his conquering love.





The Liturgy

Adapted from *The Complete Library of Christian Worship* 6.344-346.

Leader:

The washing of one another's feet, following the example of Jesus when he washed the feet of his disciples, is a symbol of our need for renewed cleansing and forgiveness, made possible by the love of God and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In Jesus' footwashing we see the majesty of God, who always stoops to lift our burdens and cleanse our sins, empowering us to live freely. Through washing another's feet, we also commit ourselves to lives of service, in the spirit of Christ, who took on human form, humbling himself in cross-bearing service to others. By kneeling and washing, we express the love which serves human needs, both within our fellowship and outside this place. Hear then the Word of the Lord.



Reading of John 13:1-17

Silent Meditation



Footwashing Litany

Leader:

O Prince of Peace, O Friend of Sinners,
we praise you and give you thanks,
because you laid aside your power as a garment
and took upon yourself the form of a slave.

People:

You became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.
You allowed yourself to be born to die in our place,
You allowed your own feet to be anointed for death.
You allowed a sinner to wash your feet with her tears.
For God chose what is low and despised in the world
to bring to nothing things that are.

Therefore, with the woman who gave you birth,
with the woman who anointed you for death,
with the woman who worshiped you with her tears,
and with all our fellow sinners
who have loved and served you from that time till now,
we praise you, Lord Jesus.

Leader:

O Eternal Father, blessed is our brother Jesus,
who on that night before Passover,
rose from the Supper, laid aside his garments
took a towel and poured water,
and washed his disciples' feet, saying to them:
"If I, your Lord and Teacher,
have washed your feet,
you also ought to wash one another's feet.
If you know these things,
blessed are you if you do them."

People:

Come now, mighty Spirit of God,
wash us and make us one body in Christ,
that, as we are bound together
in this act of love,
we may no longer be in bondage
to the principalities and powers that enslave creation,
but may know your liberating peace
such as the world cannot give. Amen.



The Footwashing



Unison Closing Prayer

Blessed are you, Lord God.
The basin and the towel are signs to us of your Son's servanthood.
You have made us partakers of Christ and of one another.
As we go forth, give us grace
to count others more important than ourselves,
to love our enemies,
to make peace.

Send the Spirit of truth to keep alive in us
 what Jesus taught and did,
 that our words may carry his good news, and
 that our lives may bear the shape of the cross
 of the One who lives and reigns with You
 and with the Holy Spirit,
 One God, forever and ever. Amen.



Song Suggestions:

Michael Card, "The Basin & the Towel," from his *Poema* CD

Edmund P. Clowney, "You Came to Us, Dear Jesus," *Trinity Hymnal* (1990), no. 596

"Though I May Speak with Bravest Fire," text by Hal Hopson (1972), *Trinity Hymnal*, no. 597

Robert Gillard, "The Servant Song" © 1977 Scripture in Song

"Jesu, Jesu, Fill Us with Your Love," Ghanaian folk song, trans. by Tom Colvin (1969), *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (1990), no. 367

Frank Houghton, "Thou Who Wast Rich Beyond All Splendor," *Trinity Hymnal*, no. 230.

Kathleen Thomerson, "I Want to Walk as a Child of the Light," *The Hymnal 1982* (Episcopal), no. 490.

Mark Altrogge, "We Sing Your Mercies" © 1997 PDI Praise.

Dan Schutte, "City of God" © 1981, 1992 New Dawn Music

The Servant Song

Chords: D, G/D, A7sus/D, D, G/D, A7, G, D2/F#, Em7, A7, G, Em, G/A, A, D

Lyrics:
 Broth - er, let me be your ser - vant,
 We are pil - grims on a jour - ney,
 I will weep when you are weep - ing,
 When we sing to God in heav - en,
 let me be as Christ to you,
 we are broth - ers on the road;
 when you laugh I'll laugh with you;
 we shall find such har - mo - ny;
 Pray that I might have the grace to
 We are here to help each oth - er
 I will share your joy and sor - row
 Born of all we've known to - geth - er
 let you be my ser - vant too.
 walk the mile and bear the load.
 till we've seen this and the through.
 of Christ's love and ag - o - ny.

Robert Gillard © 1977
 Scripture in Song