The Cloth and Basin

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Easter 5

In the early 1500s, Albrecht Dürer made a woodcut of Christ washing the disciples’ feet. The expressions of the disciples are quite interesting—ranging from doubt and confusion to contemplation. The enigma is the act of foot washing, of service, of humbling oneself to such a low station as Jesus has done in their midst: “And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, ‘Lord, are you going to wash my feet?’ Jesus answered, ‘You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.’ Peter said to him, ‘You will never wash my feet.’ Jesus answered, ‘Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.’ Simon Peter said to him, ‘Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!’ Jesus said to him, ‘One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you.’” (John 13:2-10). Jesus makes a very illuminating statement during this process: *“You do not know what I am doing, but later you will understand.”* The service Jesus performs is a service uniquely understood through faith in what transpired on the cross. Before we come to the cross, the foot washing is merely a visual parable about serving others. Once we have come to know the suffering servant, by whose stripes we are healed, the foot washing becomes even more poignant, more profound, more emblematic of the gospel and of our divine life.

There is a rich gospel symbolism in the act of washing feet. First, it reflects the loving hospitality Christ showed but did not receive from the Pharisee Simon, but which he requires of all who follow him (Luke 7:36-50). It reminds us of the woman who anointed his feet with costly oil, whose impractical act of adoration would be preached wherever the gospel was preached (Matthew 26:6-13). Washing feet is more than just good manners or hospitality. Removing the dust from the feet of guests is an acknowledgement of their life’s narrative and pilgrimage, of the roads they have walked and the pain they have suffered. It echoes the beautiful phrase: “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28-30). Moreover, foot washing is intimate—it requires contact, not just with another person, but with the dirt that the person is carrying. Not only are you acknowledging their fatigue or sickness or world-weariness, you are touching it, sensing it with your very own hands. The gospel was never meant to be an abstraction or an idea. It was a lived reality, physical and spiritual—the otherworldly lived out in this world.

When Jesus washed the disciples’ feet, he showed his willingness to embrace weakness and humiliation. It is the kind of humility that embraces a cross. As Peter Lopinski says, “By dressing as a servant and undertaking the servile and humiliating task of washing feet, Jesus identifies the paradoxical manner in which God chooses to reveal himself. The foot-washing episode parallels the account in Luke 22:27, wherein Jesus states: ‘I am among you as one who serves’; it also echoes the confessional hymn of Philippians 2:6-11, in which the Christ is described as one who ‘emptied himself, taking the form of a slave...’ (Peter Lopinski, “To Wash and Be Washed: An Exegesis of John 13:3-17,

<https://www.mcmaster.ca/mjtm/4-3.htm>). Though the Almighty God has wisdom and power beyond our comprehension and can never be diminished by our achievements or worldly wisdom, God revealed Himself through humility, through taking on our flesh and our weakness, so that we would know the meaning of love. It is both a timely and untimely message—timely because the world needs to see the love of God and the willingness of the followers of Christ to serve; untimely because it seems the church in all of its manifestations is more interested in secular politics and power than in preaching truth and binding up the wounds of others. Reverend Jonathan Best wrote the following in the journal *The Freewill Baptist:*  “For years I have wondered what needs to change in our world and in our nation. I have wondered what needs to change in Christianity so that it’s less about buildings and bank accounts, and more about people. Is there a practice or a symbol that visibly demonstrates the message of Christ? It was then that I re-discovered foot washing. In that upper room Jesus does something remarkable. It’s so subtle and unassuming that it’s easy to miss. In this act Jesus does not give any great speeches or profound teachings. There are no great crowds, no sermons on the mount, no raising of the dead, no healing of the sick, and no feeding of the 5,000. Instead Jesus does something so simple, so humble, and so weak that even Christians have for centuries failed to realize its implications. We have failed to realize that the ministry and message of Jesus is found in foot washing. This one act demonstrates what Christianity should be about. It demonstrates that Christianity is not built on strength or power, but on weakness…Weakness is embracing the marginalized and the outcasts. Weakness is identifying with the poor rather than the rich. Weakness is striving for humility. Weakness is a countercultural movement against the selfish, power hungry, violent, and destructive culture that we live in. Weakness is the message and life of Jesus. It’s found in the beatitudes, it’s found in his life as a servant for others, it’s found in his preference for the lowest of the low in the society He lived in. Weakness is the reason He kept saying radical things like, ‘So the last will be first, and the first will be last’ (Matthew 20:16 nrsv). Weakness is in His acceptance of death on the cross. Jesus’ ministry was weakness. Weakness is the message of foot washing” (Reverend Jonathan L. Best, “Why A Theology of Foot-Washing is Necessary”, *The Free Will Baptist,* August, 2015. 6.).

It is not merely weakness that the gospel embraces, but humiliation. I believe the word humility might not be strong enough. Service alone is not unique to our faith, and certainly not today. A great number of people volunteer, reach out to the marginalized, and give alms, with good, selfless intentions or sometimes with selfish intentions, especially if the causes are fashionable or result in more fame or more tax credits. Also, there are fashionable marginalized people and unfashionable ones, just as there are fashionable causes and unfashionable ones. Fashion is really no indicator of justice or compassion. It is not hard, nevertheless, to preach service today because many people, religious or secular, are involved in food banks, shelters, missions, weekend volunteering or other noble efforts. Service, the way Jesus modeled it, is quite different. It really involves risk. Jesus looked ridiculous to Peter, even offensive in the humbling of himself. Although I think serving others was easy for Jesus, because of his loving heart, Jesus had to do something that was difficult even for him—he had to bear the ignorance, hatred, humiliation and abandonment of the cross. He had to look like Don Quixote fighting windmills that he called giants (Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote,* Part I, VII). Incidentally, Don Quixote’s helmet is not a traditional one, but a wash basin. Jesus was a carpenter, and legend says an expert one—but he had to leave behind his expertise and art, his carpentry, when wandering Galilee and Judea to teach the people. In the Albrecht Dürer woodcut, you can see the faces of the disciples, but you cannot really see the face of Jesus—the Lord has become invisible in service.

Perhaps that it what is required of us today. To serve in discomfort, humiliation and invisibility. Though trained in philosophy to become a school teacher, the mystic Simone Weil took a job *in cognito* in the Renault factory and almost worked herself to death. The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, though raised in a wealthy industrialist family, distributed his wealth amongst his siblings, and later worked *in cognito* as a hospital orderly in London during the Second World War. Earlier in life, while serving at the front in the First World War, Wittegentstein, though something of an agnostic himself, carried around copies of Tolstoy’s *Gospel in Brief* and Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov.* Other soldiers and workers came to call him “the man with the gospels.” In both cases, the service was not comfortable, it was not for recognition or attention, and was not meant to build upon a pre-existing skill set. They were fish out of water. I have a good friend who is a trained counsellor with a master’s degree from a good university. After a series of family and personal tragedies, she worked in Haiti and Mozambique, and then as a barrista, and then as an ambulance driver—activities that were probably far from what she had imagined her life would include, activities that others might not have pictured for her. To serve today—what would that look like? Maybe we need to serve in silence. Maybe we need to look a little idiotic, like Don Quixote or Cassandra. Maybe we need to serve where we are not in a leadership position, where we do not critique or criticize but listen, where we put our ideas on hold and just work. Maybe we need to just go home and tell our neighbours and friends that Jesus died for their sins. Maybe we need to become “those people with the gospels.” And if we are passionate and motivated about something, maybe that is the path to avoid; maybe we need to find the path that is not very appealing, not very practical, not very promising, not very intelligent, and certainly not fashionable or understandable to the world.

Whatever your cloth and basin is, it must be love. As the apostle Paul eloquently told us, we can do all manner of charitable and self-sacrificing activities, but if we have not love, it is nothing and we are nothing (1 Corinthians 13). When Jesus washed the feet of the disciples, he was concretely acting out love, so that we would live out love. As Richard M. Adams remarks: “In John, however, knowledge of love does not come simply by observing its enactment. Jesus tells the apostles that they cannot stop when they simply understand these things. Rather, ‘you are blessed if you do them’ (John 13:17). Dürer's inclusion of the 12 apostles' contemplative responses…invites observers to consider the significance of Jesus' act for their own lives… True knowledge of love comes not from observing others love, but from acting out love toward someone else. It is this knowledge through action that is the focus of the remainder of John's last supper scene, the inauguration of a ‘new commandment’ from Jesus to love one another (John 15:9-17). Jesus identifies in John 13:15 that his act of washing Peter's feet is an ‘example,’ a term that has a double meaning in John's narrative. Certainly Jesus' humble act is one particular example of his love for them, a love on full display in his dying for his friends at the cross. As Dürer's focus on the faces of the apostles suggests, though, Jesus' act is also ‘an example’ of the way those around Jesus are to love one another. The gospel writer and Dürer both recognize that Christ's act of footwashing is as much about the audience as it is the Christ. Christ washing Peter's feet is a physical enactment of the narrator's transition statement to begin the last supper, the final scene of Jesus' ministry in John: ‘Having loved his own in the world, he loved them unto the end’ (KJV). This final clause might better be translated ‘he loved them fully’ (CEB), a translation that accurately captures the extreme nature of love depicted in scenes like the footwashing. John's gospel and Dürer's woodcut show not the final act of Jesus' love, but the extreme nature of that love, a love which he calls all who follow him to embody” (Richard M. Adams, “Christ Washes Peter’s Feet: A Theological Reflection”, April 2017. <http://pitts.emory.edu/collections/digitalcollections/mss406-washing-reflection.cfm> ).

The 15th Century is not, I have been told, terribly relevant to modern life or the gospels, but I would like to conclude with another word picture. Last Sunday evening, I watched *Andrei Rublev,* the 1966 film by Andrei Tarkovsky. It is one of the finest films ever made, enchanted and ensouled with the simple gospel. It is a long, slow, black and white film somewhat based on the life of the great icon painter who lived in 15th Century Russia, perhaps one of the most uncomfortable world-ages to live in. Throughout the film, we do not see much icon painting. Instead, we see Andrei and his fellow monks and icon painters suffering humiliation after humiliation as they try to serve. There are the insults of peasants, the cruelty of the boyars, the mockery and bullying of pagans, the great and absolute terror and violence of invading Tartars who burn most of their craftsmanship; there is sickness and there is famine—not to mention their own personal doubts and struggles with sin. In the end, the last few minutes of the film are in colour—there is no drama, no actors—these few minutes only show the icons that have survived in history, radiant in their artistic beauty and spiritual significance, in full colour—things invisible made visible. Our service and invisibility, our humility and patience will also give birth to colours, to living pictures of divine realities, if only we are willing to walk the road that is full of dust, carrying our cloths and our wash basins.