

## **The Joys of Foot Washing**

I grew up Methodist. Meaning, the Methodist Church is where we spent a lot of time, not just at Sunday services and Sunday school, but at regular family and youth events. I was also very active in the Methodist Campus Ministry while in college, including many anti-war and civil rights activities. I was so involved in Methodism that I was granted a religious exemption to serving in the military when I was drafted in 1969. Most exemptions went to members of traditional “peace” churches such as the Mennonites, but for me Methodism was such a place.

My religious participation ended after college, and it wasn't really until we joined the Episcopal Church nearly two decades ago that I realized what was missing from the church of my first two decades. I was at first taken aback at Episcopal communion: wine rather than grape juice, and it was served in a common cup at the altar rather than in little plastic cups delivered to communicants in the pews. And I was used to communion maybe twice a year, but certainly not every week!

But I came to embrace the Episcopal liturgy, especially the weekly ritual of communion. The fact that communion happens every week and is the centerpiece of our service tells us to pay attention: this is the heart of the Christian tradition. And Holy Week is the time of year when we dive

deep into the origins of this ritual and contemplate the account of Jesus' Last Supper. We think about what Jesus is telling us as well as his disciplines. If nothing else, this remembrance should protect us from the danger of our communion practices becoming routine, washed of their meaning by overuse. May the coming days of scripture, prayer, and re-enactment of Jesus giving his body and blood for us truly be a profound experience for each of us that helps us enter this holy sacrament at an even deeper level.

Today we celebrate another ritual that is nearly as profound as communion, but one that I think we only give a "Methodist" type nod to—the equivalent of grape juice instead of wine. And that's foot washing. In twenty years of attendance at Maundy Thursday services I don't recall ever seeing more than a handful of communicants actively participating. I'm sure that a major reason for this lack is the inconvenience, infrequency and public embarrassment of practicing this ritual. But I think it probably is also due to our not understanding the meaning and power of this simple ritual. (Or maybe at a subconscious level we understand it well and are afraid.)

Recently I gained a better understanding of why foot washing is such an important and powerful ritual when I watched an episode of "Tales by Light" featuring photographer Simon Lister and his work with children in

Bangladesh. Sponsored by UNICEF, Lister takes moving photos of children, typically between the ages of 8 and 13, who work picking scraps in garbage dumps to be sold for pennies to support their families who live in squalid conditions right next to busy railroad tracks.

Picture it, if you can: young children in ragged clothes and bare feet rummaging through mounds of garbage for plastic spoons and other nearly worthless items to trade for pennies per large bag. One of the most poignant photos Lister takes is of an aid worker washing and caring for the wounded feet of one youngster. The power of this simple act makes me weep when I think of it.

You and I won't wash such feet tonight, nor will they be the dirty, smelly feet of the disciples who walked dusty streets and roads in thin sandals. You can see why Peter objected to his master washing his feet--that's a lowly, unpleasant job, and it's not peasants who typically have someone else wash their feet.

But that's part of the point, isn't it? As with the sacrament of his body and blood, Jesus is trying to give his followers rituals to remember what he came for--to teach us how to give, how to love each other simply and deeply in our everyday activities such as eating, drinking, and bathing.

I think today of nurses, nursing home workers, parents or home care workers who clean those they work and live with. Often it's not the most pleasant body parts that need to be washed.

When such bathing happens both the washer and the washed are quite vulnerable, and therein lies the power of this simple act: we allow the other person to see and touch us often in sensitive places and ways. But the caregiver is also vulnerable: they must try to be sensitive to the dignity of the person they're washing, which means great care must be taken. The dangers of a faux pax are multiplied in such an intimate situation.

Whether or not we wash each other's feet tonight ( I encourage you all to participate), I believe that Jesus' reply to Peter's protestations is accurate: "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." As with most fundamental truths, the test is in the doing. We can't know the profundity of love unless we allow the other person to know us in our vulnerabilities and our weaknesses.

I think that most of us have learned to take the meanings and power of communion into our everyday lives, where we try to share ourselves with others, whether they're friends or relatives, members of our community, or people as far away as Ukraine.

How can we learn to live out the lessons of foot washing, that other Holy Week ritual with which we are not as familiar? One helpful source for me has been a traditional Buddhist practice called *metta*. (No, it's not the name of Facebook's controlling company.) This Pali word means **loving kindness**. In *metta* meditation the practitioner is instructed to imagine the person they wish to embrace in loving kindness and then to imagine them happy, finding joy, overcoming difficulties and so on. If you wash someone's feet tonight or have yours washed, I encourage you to practice loving kindness toward the person whose feet you're washing or who is washing yours. Focus intently on them as you wish all the best for them. And later I encourage you to continue honing your ability to spread, to be, loving kindness. That's what Jesus was trying to model for us as he prepared his disciples for his coming death by symbolically offering his body and blood. For them. For us. Amen