

The “Real Presence” in Footwashing

BY BILL J. LEONARD

I have never participated in a footwashing service that did not transcend the moment. Somehow I always forget how overpowering an event it can be. The sheer vulnerability of it carries participants beyond its anticipated logistical awkwardness to a palpable expression of servanthood.

In a wonderful documentary on the Old Regular Baptists of Appalachia entitled *In the Good Old Fashioned Way*, a female member of the Little Dove Baptist Church declares: “I wouldn’t take the bread and the wine if I didn’t wash feet.” The film then moves to a Communion and footwashing service, women on one side of the church, men on the other. Members “gird themselves” with a towel, kneel and participate in what they often call the “third sacrament,” as the preacher chants, “Oh, them feetwashing Baptists; we’ll be here till the Lord comes again.”[†] The practice characterizes numerous Baptist traditions.

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My first footwashing experience began as an experiment. I began teaching at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (SBTS) in Louisville, Kentucky in the fall of 1976, and was required to teach the two-semester church history course required of every Master of Divinity student. Because most students were Baptists, a substantial part of the second semester course focused on Baptist history. As we approached the Lenten season, it dawned on me that neither I nor most of my students had ever participated in a footwashing. So on Maundy Thursday, 1976, I convened the first ever footwashing on the

SBTS campus. Everyone was asked to bring a towel and I scrounged up some Tupperware basins. We read the John 13 passage in which Jesus washes his disciples' feet and declares: "I give you a new commandment (*mandatus novum*), that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another" (13:34). Noting that the Holy Week designation of *Maundy* Thursday came from that Latin phrase, we sang and prayed together, and washed feet. To everyone's surprise the service got beyond us; it took us into spiritual territory that few of us had occupied before. And suddenly SBTS had a new tradition. From 1976 to 1991 (my last Lent at SBTS), I helped with the annual Maundy Thursday footwashing. (I think my colleague Dr. Molly Marshall kept it going a few years longer, and I have often wondered what might have happened in the Southern Baptist Convention if "moderates" and "conservatives" had washed each other's feet in the 1980s and 90s.)

In the spring of 1980, I joined my church history colleague Dr. Timothy George in reorganizing the service and adding Holy Communion, a rather scandalous practice in those days since many Southern Baptist seminaries eschewed on-campus Communion, insisting that it was to be administered only as a "local church ordinance." Timothy George and I have been friends for forty years. Our views sometimes (but not always) occupy diverse ends of the theological spectrum, yet we have washed each other's feet literally and figuratively for a long, long time, a gift for which I am forever grateful. When the Maundy Thursday footwashing/Communion services were an annual tradition at the seminary, several hundred students, faculty, and staff members participated in the occasion, with music guided and gifted by folksinger Darrell Adams and his lyrical guitar. The memories of those moments remain deep and clear.

I have also washed feet in Appalachia, a most appropriate place for such an observance. For almost a decade I was privileged to teach in the summer program of the Appalachian Ministries Educational Resource Center (AMERC), held on the campus of Berea College in Berea, Kentucky. Founded by Presbyterian minister, Mary Lee Daugherty, AMERC is a consortium of theological schools that in the 1980s and 90s brought students for a month-long experience of study on the Berea College campus and internships in churches and small farms throughout the region. Because the students came from a variety of denominations—Catholic, Mainline Protestant, and Evangelical—Daugherty knew that Holy Communion could be problematic; so, she utilized footwashing as a concluding ritual to the summer experience.

Once again, the powerful services transcended the specific moment. I shall never forget the night in the Danforth Chapel at Berea College when we washed feet with a group of men and women that included a Byzantine Franciscan in his rough brown robe, assorted ordained Protestant women, and a serpent-handling preacher whose revival service we had attended the

night before. The preacher, Arnold Saylor, washed the feet of his young son and then gently kissed them. When it was over I do not think there was a dry eye in the chapel. Reverends Daugherty and Saylor have “gone on to glory” now, as they both would have said, and I doubt if any of us who washed feet in the Danforth Chapel that night will ever forget that moment, till we “go on to glory” too. Walking back to the dorm that night Brother Saylor told me: “You know, Brother, in our services the men and women do not wash each other’s feet unless they are married. Some of our wives don’t believe in cutting their hair, so it is very long. Sometimes they wash their husband’s feet and dry them with their hair, like that woman did for Jesus.” “Brother Saylor,” I responded, “that sounds a little sexy to me.” He just laughed.

Perhaps Brother Saylor was on to something. If at Christ’s table we repeat his words, “this is my body given for you,” in footwashing we declare to one another: “these are our bodies,” broken, bruised, and vulnerable. So if footwashing is not a sacrament, perhaps it is at least sacramental, an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual confession of common humanity and uncommon grace. Perhaps it represents the “real presence” of persons who belong to the body of Christ and thus to each other, a *mandatus novum* to love each other in Jesus’ name: flesh and Spirit, towel and basin, the water and the Word.

NOTE

† *In the Good Old Fashioned Way*, directed by Herb E. Smith (Whitesburg, KY: Appalshop, 1973)



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