

While Washing My Daughter's Feet

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A sermon I will never forget was preached not long ago in a Cuban living room. Eleven members of our church were visiting our sister congregation in Camaguey, Cuba. Most of our group were in Cuba for the first time. We were building the foundation for what we hoped will be a long and strong church friendship. We had had a complex and rich week with new friends, we were sad on our fifth day together to be leaving. Ken was among the group and was sick for the formal worship service held earlier that week. I knew the outline of his sermon as I was to be his interpreter and my limited Spanish worked best with time to prepare. On our last day in Camaguey I encouraged him to recap his intended sermon. I was a bit nervous about this. I was a bit nervous about the translating, yet I was more nervous about his message and the fact we were considering whether or not to offer a foot washing. Would that be culturally taboo, too much too soon, offensive in any way?

We sat in the high-ceilinged living room, and I took a deep breath. I explained to our friends that we wanted to end our time with a few words and a parting ritual. Ken began speaking about the cross as a symbol of Christianity. He pleaded that it has been weakened and manipulated. He spoke of gold chains and crosses, jewelry symbolizing wealth and power. He regretted how too often the cross is turned upside down and used as a sword. He then spoke about alternative symbols. "Consider then the basin and towel." He told the story of the last night Jesus had with his disciples. It was the night before Passover in Jerusalem. An unsafe time and a risky place. The political climate intense, the Roman Army occupied the streets and Passover was a time of potential violence. Surely the disciples were fearful and reluctant. "Why here? Why now?" they must have been thinking. He walked in, took off his robe, wrapped a towel around his waist, and began washing the disciples' feet. When he got to Peter, Peter said, "NO, not my feet. You will never wash my feet." Jesus responded, "If you do not allow me to do this, then you will have no part of me." Jesus evened the playing field that night. No one is better or worse; no one is higher or lower. He then encouraged them to wash one another's feet.

Consider the basin and towel as a symbol of the Christian faith. To wash another's feet one must be attentive and vulnerable. There is implied service to one another. It is a caring, tactile symbol. How much more difficult it is to hold ideas, values, biblical interpretations, judgments over another person when kneeling before them washing their feet.

Suddenly, a Peter-like thought flashed into my mind: "Are we ready for that intimacy, that vulnerability, that connection in our lives? Am I?"

After Ken's shortened living-room sermon, we offered to the small group of our Cuban friends the idea of doing a foot washing before we left. "We are different now because of this trip and our time with you," I said. "We would like to share this ritual with one another and with you, if you care to join us." We admitted that we as a congregation, and as our small group of travelers, had not done this together before.

It was powerful. A simple wooden stool was placed in the middle of the circle. A large, dented, metal basin quickly appeared, and a two-gallon water bottle, one of the many we had used for drinking water, became part of the ritual. We slowly made our way around the circle pouring cool Cuban water over each others' naked feet and into the common basin. We quietly sang, swayed, and washed each other's precious, precious feet.

For someone for whom public emotion is a rarity, I could not contain the sweetness and goodness I felt in this moment. It felt wonderful to place my feet in the puddle left by those before me, and it felt healing to feel the water poured anew. I then I had the chance to wash the feet of Joy, my courageous 9-year-old daughter. Be cleaned, I thought. Be free, I prayed.

Something was cleansed in me during this trip to Cuba. I was able to clean a part of me that needed cleansing. Frequently through our trip I had heard myself use the phrase of "our dirty hands." This was referring to the long and complex history of US-Cuban relations. Learning this history and watching it sink into the minds of the children of our trip had made a big impact on me. Control, disease, domination, murder, torture, and neglect. It is repeated all over the world on a daily basis. Traveling to Cuba brought that reality to the surface. My hands did feel dirty. My busy working-mother life keeps me longing to survive just getting through my to-do list each day: each task, each meeting, each call night, each afterschool activity, dinner, dishes, homework..... still hoping that somewhere there is a glimpse of accountability to what is happening in Cubas all over the world. Going to Cuba allowed me to embrace and grieve this history, this reality, to celebrate the victory of the human spirit, and to feel touched by God in a new and truly grace-filled way. That shared basin freed me of sins I had not committed and filled me with hope for what else might take up that newly opened space in my heart. Is this what Jesus meant? Of course he knew it would be worth the risk.

Jesus did not tell us to keep our feet clean. He urged us to wash each other's feet. He knew our path would be dusty and our work sometimes dirty. He knew that in relationship--in mutual, loving, listening, understanding, hopeful relationship, we might be able to wipe away some of the pain we experience each day. Through our vulnerability, trust' and un-robeing' we may be able to help each other be cleansed and freed of the fear that holds us back. Through giving and receiving in risky unfamiliar ways we might find renewal.

My friends and family, we have struggled as this group of Cuba travelers to know how best to share our experience with you. As we struggle to understand what it means to be a sister church we are most aware of our deep hope to learn how we might be better brothers and sisters to one another here at Circle of Mercy. Can we with one another's help wash away our insecurities, our inadequacies, our fears and doubts, the limitations that hold us back from feeling and being fully alive? With each other's help, with each others kneeling, pouring, washing, cleansing help, is the place and time too risky or just right? During communion, I invite you have your feet washed. The invitation has no expectations other than to continue our journey together.

Jesus said, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." Is this what Jesus meant? Of course he knew it would be worth the risk.

