

Reflections on foot washing

Do you understand what I have done for you?

by Don Clymer

"I want to wash your feet," he said to me as he gazed intently into my eyes, "and I will tell you why." I was attending a foot washing service at the Fraternidad Cristiana Mennonite Church in Mexico City. The man who wanted to wash my feet was the pastor and a long-time leader in the Mennonite church in Mexico. I hadn't seen him for more than 20 years. ►

The author (left) and Victor in Mexico City.
Photo provided

The practice of washing feet at this church was completely different from the one I was accustomed to. One could wash the feet of more than one person and could wash the feet of a person of the opposite sex. In order to wash someone's feet in that context, however, one had to have a reason and had to explain that reason to the person whose feet one wanted to wash. The ensuing observance of foot washing drew the congregation intimately together in significant ways too often missing in my own experiences of this practice. It modeled what Mark Nation in his article on foot washing identifies as Jesus' intentions for the act: "If Jesus is to create a community of disciples who seriously follow him, they will need to know that intimacy [the act of foot washing] includes cleansing, vulnerability and forgiveness" (see box).

This stooping, bowing and lowering is an act of humility, an act of vulnerability, an act of love.

The foot washing service I experienced in Mexico City did just that. It also made me reflect on Jesus' question to his disciples after he performed this symbolic act: "Do you understand what I have done for you?" (John 13: 12 NIV).

Following their custom, the pastor explained his reason for washing my feet: "Twenty-five years ago, when our country was hurting from a devastating earthquake, you came to our aid," Victor said to me. "We are so grateful that you came to stand in solidarity with us during our time of pain. You embodied the act of service that foot washing represents." He was referring to the fact that my wife and I had volunteered to direct a reconstruction program for Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) in Mexico.

Victor wanted to show his love for me in more than just words. Jesus wanted to do the same for

his disciples and did it through a simple act of humility and degradation, foot washing. "Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love" (John 13:1 NIV). In order to do this, Victor had to stoop over, bow down and lower himself in front of me. Jesus did the same to his disciples. This stooping, bowing and lowering is an act of humility, an act of vulnerability, an act of love. All are essential elements in the kingdom Jesus came to establish.

In Jesus' time, this act was part of showing hospitality to guests. Most of us know that servants or women were usually the ones who washed the feet of the guests when they arrived for a meal. A person of dignity, such as a teacher, a Rabbi or any man for that matter, would never lower himself to wash the filth off what was considered one of the most unclean parts of the body. John Christopher Thomas in his book on foot washing underscores this point: "Those who receive foot washing are always the social superiors of those who render the service" (see box).

This stooping and bowing in humiliation and vulnerability in front of another person are not done easily in our culture. We no longer bow with our whole bodies and kneel to pray in our church services. We barely manage to bow our heads. Whereas foot washing used to be performed as part of the celebration of Communion, it is now relegated to the once-a-year Maundy Thursday service with typically lower attendance than on a Sunday morning. Have we become too dignified to bow? To wash feet? To bow to another to wash their feet shows either total submission with no sense of dignity or total devotion and vulnerability: "In cases of deep love or extreme devotion a host or a loved one might wash the feet of another. Due to its humble nature, the performance of such an act demonstrates tremendous affection, servitude or both" (Thomas).

"Do you understand what I have done for you?" Jesus asks. He showed his devotion, his love to his disciples through stooping to wash their feet. He had to stoop and make himself vulnerable to do so. Victor did the same for me.

Victor continued his reason for wanting to wash my feet. "I want to confess," he said unflinchingly as he looked in my eyes, "that I have too often had a bad attitude toward my American brothers and sisters. Would you please forgive me for that attitude and be my brother." By now I could not hold back the tears. His confession outlined years of misunderstandings between mission organiza-



tions and national leaders. I myself had participated in a number of such misunderstandings. Because I controlled many resources during the earthquake reconstruction, I had too often been the servant who tried to be “greater than his master” (John 13: 16).

After he lovingly washed my feet, it was my turn. “First, I want to thank you and your congregation for hosting our students in spite of some initial misgivings,” I said. I was referring to the fact that his congregation was hosting a group of 18 students from Eastern Mennonite University (EMU) during Holy Week. I had echoed his gratitude. Now it was my chance to address his appeal for forgiveness. “I forgive you,” I said. “But I need forgiveness, too. I confess that I, along with many of my compatriots, have acted in arrogant ways, using our wealth and white privilege to try to exert our control and influence over the church in Mexico. Would you forgive us for our arrogance?” He nodded his forgiveness, and I washed his feet.

Victor and I embodied another of the essential elements for the kingdom of God, as identified by Nation. We forgave each other. Asking for forgiveness is not easily done in our culture or in many others. Most cultures have developed intricate ways to save face, to keep from admitting one’s failures, to keep one from feeling vulnerable and humble. The posture of servitude while bowing before another to wash their feet produces the necessary vulnerability to allow confession and forgiveness to take place.

“Do you understand what I have done for you?” Jesus asks. He opened the door for forgiveness to happen within his community of disciples when he said, “‘and you are clean, though not every one of you.’ For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean” (John 13:10b, 11). Unfortunately, it didn’t happen. He showed vulnerability by stooping to wash his disciples’ feet, allowing the possibility of forgiveness. Victor did the same for me.

After Victor and I washed each other’s feet, we stood up and embraced each other firmly. “I love you, brother,” I told him. “I love you, too,” he said. I felt elated. Seldom had I felt such a sense of brotherhood, forgiveness, love. This sense of love transcended national, ethnic, cultural and language barriers. I felt cleansed, washed, clean. Indeed, we embodied the “cleansing” Nation wrote about.

Cleansing usually involves water. The obvious medium for cleansing in the foot washing cere-

mony is the water in the basin, which cleaned our feet in spite of the fact that they were not very dirty. Tears are also a cleansing medium. Tears of joy and forgiveness flowed freely in our encounter with the act of washing feet. Nation further clarifies the point: “We need this cleansing, this washing, not only once at our baptism but repeatedly. As Jesus is lovingly present with us, we need his cleansing, we need his washing of the filth that threatens to define our lives” (Nation).

“Do you understand what I have done for you?” Jesus asks. By stooping in vulnerability and humility and washing his disciples’ feet, he offered

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cleansing not only for the body but also for the soul. “Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you” (John 13: 14-15 NIV). Victor did this for me.

I came away from that foot washing service in a small, struggling Mennonite congregation in Mexico City with a little better understanding of what Jesus had done for me.



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Works cited

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