

INSIDE PEOPLE



Christians Embrace Lesson of Humility Jesus Taught Disciples

[By Michael Miller]

Jamie Patton was nervous.

She doesn't get her feet washed — by someone else — every day.

But a feeling of "awe and reverence" in her experience of the foot-washing rite practiced at Peoria (Ill.) First Church of the Brethren and many other Christian churches on Holy Thursday has persisted over the past few years.

She and others will experience it again as the day on which the Last Supper is commemorated rolls around during Holy Week for Christians later this month.

Congregations observe the practice in order to follow the example of Jesus as related in the Gospel of John. According to that account of Jesus' final supper with his disciples, he shocked them — or, at least Peter — by stripping down to his tunic, tying a towel around his waist and washing and drying their feet.

This in a time when most people trod the dirt roads of Israel on sandals or bare feet.

"I try to explain to the people that in Jesus' day, not even the slaves were required to wash the feet of their masters, and yet Jesus, who is really the master of the universe, here he is on his hands and knees washing the feet of his disciples," said the Rev. John Verrier, pastor of St. Mary's Catholic Church in Metamora, Ill.

That parish will practice the rite on Holy Thursday, on which the Last Supper is commemorated, although it's optional as part of the Roman Catholic Church Holy Thursday liturgy.

It's common practice in the Church of the Brethren and other Protestant churches. The Brethren do it twice a year as part of their love feasts on Holy Thursday and just before Thanksgiving. Besides foot washing, the love feast includes Holy Communion of consecrated bread and wine as well as a light meal of bread dipped into a beef or lamb dish, as also was done at the Last Supper.

"Jesus said, 'I have given you an example, do this for one another'" said the Rev. Dana McNeil, pastor of Peoria First Church of the Brethren. He referred to John 13:14, "'So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.'"

"For Brethren, it just doesn't fit to just do the bread and the cup," McNeil said.

After a time of self-examination, members of the congregation move from the sanctuary into the social hall, men at one row of tables, women at another.

"Many people find that more comfortable because of the intimacy of washing one another's feet," McNeil said.

Other Brethren churches, though, mix the genders.

The Peoria church also practices the "single mode" for foot washing: One person washing his neighbor's feet, then the person whose feet has just been washed washing and drying the feet of the person next to him, and so on.

"Each person, by the time we're finished, has washed and has been washed," McNeil said.

A "double mode" practiced in past centuries involved a few designated washers; all would have their feet washed, but not all would wash another's feet.

Those doing the washing at the Peoria Brethren church ask if they "may serve you in the name of Christ," McNeil said. They then wash the person's feet in a basin of warm water and dry them with a towel that had been tied around the washer's waist. After the washing is done, both people stand and usually embrace, with a blessing being given by the person who has done the washing.

INSIDE PEOPLE

Then the person who has just done the washing puts the towel on the person about to wash the next person's feet, McNeil said.

"You're still serving them. It's done in very much a state of reverence," the pastor said.

That state of reverence and attitude of service is extended to the end of the evening, when everyone puts away chairs and tables "without a lot of noise," McNeil said.

"The love feast for the Brethren is kind of our high holy time," he said. "It's not attended by everyone in the church, but when people leave love feasts, they feel like they've been in the presence of Christ."

Foot washing reminds participants "that we are to remain humble, that we are to serve," McNeil said. "We serve because our Savior served us, our Savior died for us."

The Church of the Brethren has practiced foot washing at their "love feasts" since the denomination's inception in the early 1700s. Patton, 41, said she attended Brethren churches as a child, but didn't take part in a love feast and foot washing until her return to the church several years ago.

"The first time, I was nervous about it, because it's kind of a strange situation that you find yourself in," Patton said. "But I also

found it a very humbling experience.

"To kneel down and wash your [Christian] sister's or your brother's feet helps remind us that we're serving one another," she said.

"It's very hygienic because you do wash your hands after you wash someone's feet," Patton said.

"It's this awe and this reverence that you feel in this room. You're reaching back centuries to when Jesus did that for his disciples."

In the Catholic practice of foot washing, only the feet of 12 people - typically men, though women also have their feet washed at some places - representing the 12 apostles are washed.

"The priest takes off his chasuble [outer vestment] and brings a bowl of warm water," Verrier of St. Mary's in Metamora said. "I like to put lemons in it so they smell really nice.

"We give them a nice foot rub and wash down their feet. Some servers hand me towels and I towel off their feet. That's suppose to represent the message that Jesus did not come to be served, but to serve, because after Jesus washed the feet of the apostles, Peter protested. Jesus said, 'You must let me wash your feet' because he was trying to teach Peter because he was going to be the

leader of the church."

It was a vital lesson to the men who, the Catholic Church teaches, would be the first bishops, Verrier said.

"He says, 'Do you realize what I just did for you? I could demand that you wash my feet. Here I am washing your feet.'

"It means that love can be in the details, in even the menial task of service," Verrier said.

The pastor stressed the "menial" part. People in that time and that part of the world typically wore sandals, and "their feet got stinky and dirty."

"There would have been toe jam and all kinds of crud because they weren't expecting" to have their feet washed.

Even though the people getting their feet washed have usually already bathed them before the Mass, Verrier said, he still makes sure people see him cleaning his hands "really good," since he will be serving communion shortly after the rite.

"It really was a beautiful lesson of humility and service," Verrier said. "It's a good thing for people to see the priests do it. They have to realize we have a ministry of service to the people."

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