Spirituality



(Maxwell Kuzma)



by Maxwell Kuzma

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

April 6, 2023

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

I distinctly remember seeing an image on social media a few years ago portraying Jesus washing the feet of several different and polarizing characters, including former presidents. Many shared the image with a commentary focused on the idea of Jesus as being egalitarian, but this interpretation and image of Holy Thursday is missing a few important points.

Washing feet in general is an unglamorous action. To crouch at someone's feet puts the washer in a vulnerable posture and requires engaging directly with a body part that has close proximity to an endless buffet of dirt and germs. Anyone who has cared for the elderly or for a person who is unable to perform certain hygiene functions themselves understands the unique intimacy of this interaction, which makes requirements on the dignity of both people.

When we look at Jesus washing feet and substitute different contentious characters in the scene, we remove the focus on intimacy in favor of a pop-art style shock– the washing of the feet as an iteration of Andy Warhol's Campbell's Soup paintings.

Jesus makes intimacy the point when he says, "So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example so that you should do as I have done for you. Truly, truly, I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him" (John 13:14-16).

Nowhere in the Gospels is Jesus concerned with status. One of the most attractive and frankly mysterious qualities Jesus possesses is his ability to disrupt the typical flow of a social interaction because he simply does not behave according to expectations.

Advertisement

The washing of the disciples' feet is a great example of this. At various parishes, I have seen an emphasis on the "service" theme that Jesus refers to in the Scripture, with members of the congregation chosen to have their feet washed due to their volunteer work or other contributions to the church.

But this emphasis is only part of the picture, an extremely literal interpretation of this aspect of the story. "Jesus said wash people's feet, so we're going to wash some

feet!" Yes, but what follows?

A new commandment. After setting the stage with the institution of the Eucharist at the Lord's Supper and the washing of the feet, Jesus is ready to introduce a teaching so significant that he calls it a new commandment: Love one another. "As I have loved you, so you also must love one another" (John 13:34).

The washing of the feet, then, was never meant as a photo op or an Instagrammable moment (despite how iconic of an image it has now become), but instead a demonstration. This is what Jesus meant when he said to love one another. To humble yourself, to reach out and meet the other in what is messy.

As a transgender Catholic living in America in 2023, I wonder what our church could learn if we put this type of humble, messy love into practice, if we were less concerned with status and power dynamics and more interested in meeting people on the margins. Jesus was never someone who cared about social status or about what people would say about him. He was deeply concerned with the dignity of the human person.

> Sometimes society doesn't know what to do with us. But without hesitation, I know Jesus prefers us to be both present and visible. He would absolutely seek to spend time with transgender people.
>
> Tweet this

Many trans people have been on both sides of the foot-washing exchange. We rely on the love and support of friends, family, doctors and other allies as we go through transition. And we walk with our cisgender friends and family as they adjust to the changes that come along with our journey.

Sometimes society doesn't know what to do with us and would prefer that we not be present or visible. But without hesitation, I know Jesus prefers us to be both present and visible. He would absolutely seek to spend time with transgender people. All Christians, whether part of the LGBTQ community or not, should strive to live out the new commandment this way.

This year, mere weeks before Easter, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops released a document affirming a binary view of gender, rejecting the existence of

transgender identities and calling transgender health care a disordered practice. Instead of humbly acknowledging that it is our responsibility to love transgender people even if we do not understand their experience, the bishops' document serves to shore up political power among conservative Catholics and "take a stand" in America's culture wars.

Recognizing the dignity of another person is an active process that requires going out of your comfort zone, as is depicted in the picture of foot washing. Jesus' behavior throughout the Gospels is evidence of this: He never sat back and issued judgments on groups of people. Instead, he went out to meet people where they were. On their own turf. In their own words.

To truly celebrate the mystery of Holy Week, we are called to meet people where they are — and transgender people are in the pews. We are at the grocery store, at school, in the home, living out the beautiful mystery of our lives.

Leveling theological rejections at people who are humbling themselves before God looks nothing like the example of Jesus. Maybe instead, the church can meet in a mutual intimacy of shared vulnerability — like washing each other's feet.