

Grab a Towel

Although Jesus commanded us to wash one another's feet, I know few Christians who have participated in a foot-washing service. Today it's considered an irrelevant ritual—since we don't live in the Israeli wilderness, ride smelly camels or wear dirty sandals. In this age of air-conditioning, deodorized socks and \$200 dress shoes, who wants to go to all the trouble of getting out the basins and towels?

But that is what a group of us did a few weeks ago in Tennessee when I was involved in a three-day conference led by preacher and recording artist Judy Jacobs-Tuttle and her husband, Jamie. On the last morning of the event, ushers lined up chairs across the front of the auditorium and placed giant porcelain bowls in front of each seat. Then Judy asked if I would help wash the feet of the men who were attending the meeting.

When I knelt in front of the first guy, a pastor named Jim, the floodgates opened. Tears flowed freely from both of us, even though we didn't know each other well. We didn't care that two grown men were sobbing at the front of a church while dozens of women were within earshot.

I poured the water over Jim's feet, dried them with a towel and prayed over him for several minutes. After him came Jon, a burly minister from Alabama who could easily bench-press 220 pounds. He sobbed long enough to soak the left side of my shirt. Then came Jamie, then Louis, then Mike. The men were crying louder than the women were.

What is happening to us? I wondered. We could barely make it to our seats after the experience. We were weak in the knees. Our masks and protective body armor had come off. We should have been embarrassed, but instead we simply wanted to worship.

It was as if Jesus had smashed our pride and then pulled it out by the roots. The pain felt more like euphoria. We were clean, as if this strange ritual had scrubbed off years of pretense and hypocrisy.

Our consciences had been recalibrated. Suddenly it felt so wrong to criticize a brother or to malign his reputation or to spread gossip. When we take the position of a servant—remembering that this is how Jesus served His disciples the night before He was executed like a common criminal—it's difficult to hold a grudge, say unkind words or make harsh judgments.

Humility creates a channel for God's love to flow. It cuts us to the core, turns our smugness to servanthood and levels the ground all around us—so we can't entertain the notion that we're better than the next person.

Maybe that's why Jesus initiated this unusual exercise and asked us to follow His example. In the American church, pride is our biggest problem—and the towel is still the best remedy.

What would happen if pastors interrupted Sunday morning worship to wash the feet of staff members? What if estranged Christians dropped their defenses and washed each other's feet instead of avoiding each other?

In a culture characterized by greed, self-promotion and the corporate power grab, footwashing comes off as a bizarre concept. But we can't bypass the towel and the basin just because it doesn't fit the American way of doing business.

Let's learn to kneel. Let's embrace a lifestyle of serving. We'll never know Jesus' full blessing if we don't adopt His posture.