

Washing Feet:

The whole thing started with an odd young man who was told to take his shoes off. A Burning Bush was talking to him. Moses looked quizzically at the Burning Bush, then down at his sandaled feet, then back at the Burning Bush, which, clearly, was God, so what else could he do but take off his shoes, for as the Bush said, "You are standing on holy ground. Now, go and lead your people to freedom." That's how this thing with feet and freedom first got started.

Feet and Freedom? Well, yes, actually. You see, there has been a rather long relationship between the human foot and the long-standing efforts of the God of Abraham, the God of Moses and, yes, the God of Jesus to set us free. Feet are always coming up in these Slavery to Freedom stories that our old Bible specializes in telling.

Moses has to bare his dirty feet before he dare approach the Burning Voice of God. And it is with their feet that the horde of Joseph's Sons and Daughters make their daring exit from the slave camps of Egypt. No chariots and charioteers for these poor folks; no, they put everything they can on their backs and they hoof it across the Red Sea and through the Desert of Sinai and after forty years of wandering, they finally walk themselves into the Promised Land. Feet and freedom.

And the Jesus story has plenty of feet in it too. He is a man who foots it from village to town and back to village in poor Galilee. Great crowds come to him and cast their ills at his feet for his healing blessing. Sinners looking for forgiveness fall at his feet to make their plea. His feet are washed by the sinful woman with her tears and dried with her hair. Mary, the sister of Lazarus, sits at his feet to listen to his every word while here grumpy sister toils in the kitchen. And when the time is right, Jesus uses his own two feet to walk up to Jerusalem for his dark date with Herod and Pilate and the high-priest, Caiaphas. It is not to be forgotten that Jesus' feet, his dusty, flesh and bone feet, are the last to receive the nails of crucifixion.

In each case where Jesus' feet appear in the gospels, there appears with them the extraordinary gift of freedom. The sick who are placed at his feet are healed, the sinners who fall in a heap at his feet are forgiven, Mary sitting at his feet in her home hears the word of life spoken, and in his own feet nailed to the cross, the promise of salvation is fulfilled on Golgotha.

Might we then claim something rather odd then? Might it be possible that our lowly human feet are a forgotten tool of divine liberation? Do they not daily move us toward our destiny with God? Do they not humbly carry us forward to the Holy City? Do these feet of ours not patiently support us every step of the way in our life-long pilgrimage to the Kingdom where we shall finally and fully be free?

If this be the case, then when Jesus wraps a towel around his waist, takes a pitcher of water and on the night before he dies, begins washing the feet of his disciples, he is performing a messianic act of liberation. He is certainly acknowledging in gratitude the courage of his disciples in having walked with him for three years to this dark night. He is surely proclaiming that in such walking, despite all that will happen on Good Friday, they have arrived nevertheless at the threshold of new life. But most of all, Jesus is teaching them that this new life is gained not in presiding over multitudes from royal thrones, and not in slaughtering lambs by the hundreds on temple heights; it is gained, however, in walking with the humble and in humbly serving this world's walkers. When he tells his disciples to do as he has done in washing their feet, he is commissioning them to walk as he has walked, to heal as he has healed and yes, to free as he has freed.

They are to liberate at the level of the road, they are to proclaim the truth next to the homely fireside, and ultimately, they are to change the world by getting down on their knees and washing the feet of God's poor.

This is the authentic mark of the follower of Jesus Christ: that he and she wash the feet of the beggar, the leper, and those rejected by everyone else.

Isn't it wonderfully odd what we see tonight? The whole history of salvation ends as it begins: with bare feet and the voice of God speaking: *"As I have done for you, so you must also do."*

