

Wade in the Water 2: Just a Bowl of Water
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John 13:1-17

“For I have given you an example,
that you also should do as I have done to you.”
John 13:15

[Some ideas in this sermon come from
Walter Brueggemann's book,
Living Toward a Vision.]

Each time we come to holy communion the table is set with two strong, rich symbols of the Last Supper: the bread and the cup. Along with the cross they are the pre-eminent symbols of our Christ centered faith.

But there is another powerful symbols of Jesus' Last Supper which we have virtually ignored.

The elders do not pass it from person to person, as they do the bread and cup.

It is the forgotten symbol of Jesus' Last Supper with his disciples, though, as with the bread and the cup, he commanded us to make use of **this** symbol as well – to help us become truer followers of Jesus.

It never appears on the communion table – never, until today.

For there it is, this “other” important symbol of the Last Supper.

There it is – just a bowl of water and a towel.

On the last night of his earthly life, Jesus took bread and a cup and gave them to his disciples saying: “do this.”

But he also said “do this” after he took a bowl of water and a towel and washed the disciples' feet at that same meal!

Since he said “do this” **both** times, why do we **always** do the one (bread and cup) and **never** do the other (bowl of water)?

Could some of our neglect be that in our ordinary daily lives we are much more comfortable using bread and cup with **other people** than bowl and towel?

Feeding others is part of our basic nature and our cultural norms:

"come over to dinner"
 "would you like a snack?"
 "what will you have to drink?"

The desire to supply food and drink to others – family, friends, new acquaintances, even strangers; the desire to supply food and drink is engrained in our daily social interchanges.

We are so used to giving food and drink to other people that when Jesus tells us to share bread and wine with one another as a "spiritual act," to "remember him," it suits us to a "T" – we are very **comfortable** passing bread and cup.

As symbols of our Christian calling to be disciples of Jesus Christ, bread and cup suit us just fine.

Isn't it nice that Jesus calls us to do something we already enjoy doing?

But not the bowl and the towel!

Oh no!

When do I ever use a bowl and towel on anybody else except myself?

Almost never!

The only exception I can think of was when our children were small.

Needed to be cleaned up. Gave them a bath before bed.

Even then – that was **their** towel, not **my** towel.

I did not **reuse** their bath water after they were done!

My water **my** and towel are for **my** personal private use – I have mine, you have yours!
 The kids have theirs!

Use the same water someone else has washed in?

Use my towel on another adult, on a stranger, on their feet?

You've got to be kidding!

Was Jesus kidding?

" If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you." (John 13:14-15)

That bowl of water on the communion table is not a baptismal bowl. Don't confuse the two bowls of water – they are not the same.

Baptismal water is, and remains, clean, clear water – we don't really wash the baby in it!

That bowl there is foot washing water – dirty water – almost as soon as you start – after washing twenty four feet, really dirty water! We would never use it to wash ourselves.

More to the point, the baptismal bowl is used standing up to pour the water of baptism on the head. This bowl is used down on the floor.

How often do we bow down at someone's feet?

Jesus did not wash the disciple's feet standing up!

You serve bread and cup standing up.

Jesus knew that to wash feet you have to bend or kneel before someone else – in the bent down, humble posture of a servant before a master.

The posture of someone not in control, not in charge.

An uncomfortable position for any of us!

Of course, we are speaking symbolically here.

Don't worry – I'm not going to ask for volunteers to remove their shoes.

So, speaking symbolically, what do these "other" symbols of the Lord's Supper teach us about living the Christian, the Christ-follower life?

As symbols, bread and cup remind us that we are fed by God in so many ways – both physical and spiritual – and that Christ calls us to feed other people in so many ways – both physical and spiritual.

Though it is just a bowl of water and a towel, might these symbols remind us that Jesus Christ, very God incarnate, bent down and acted as a servant before our feet?

And that he also calls us to be servants? To serve other people in this our world?

Not to serve in a patronizing, "give a little bit to charity and make myself feel better" kind of way – but to bend our stiff backs, and move past our pride – our self-concern, our everlasting focus on ourselves and our needs – and learn what it means to love and serve others in Jesus name – even when the water is dirty!

Love for others is what following Jesus is all about –

It's hard to imagine **wanting** to kneel down before a stranger and wash their smelly feet.

It's hard to imagine **wanting** to stick your hands in that bowl of dirty water.

Someone could compel me to do that by force, but it's hard to imagine wanting to do it.

Hard to imagine **until I remember that the Son of God did exactly that** – and more – for me.

And he asks no less in return:

“Love one another, even those who are not at all lovable.”

“Serve one another, even those who reject what you offer.”

Take care of my people and my world – my whole world, not just your comfortable part in it.”

That's all he asks – as he feeds us bread and wine, and hands us a bowl and towel.

Let us do as he asks.

Let us love one another.

Amen.