

Scent of Love

The light came into the world, And the word became flesh and the glory of the Lord walked among us, and this night, the light stooped lower and lower, the outer garments of God's glory were removed and we find Jesus among the twelve disciples,... washing feet.

Here begins Jesus' final movement of stooping low, stooping low enough to be humiliated and broken on the cross. Here, Jesus takes in his hands the dirty, dusty feet from the streets of Jerusalem.... He takes on the full humanity of the twelve ...what does it smell like?

That's the question that Father G., as he is affectionately known, felt compelled to ask, after Delores Mission Church in Los Angeles declared itself a sanctuary church for undocumented homeless men. After weeks, the smell was undeniably there. People were beginning to grumble, some had left the church, some were looking for another church. No matter how much carpet cleaner they used or the excessive amount of incense, they could not get rid of the smell. One Sunday morning, addressing this situation in a kind of Socratic question and answer homily, Father G. asks, "So, what does the church smell like?"

Embarrassment sets in, women begin looking for something in their purses, eye contact ceases. But every church has someone who isn't afraid to tell the truth, someone who doesn't care what people will think. Don Rafel stands up, "It smells like feet... stinking dirty feet." "And why is that?" ... asks the Priest. "Because so many homeless men slept here last night" a woman responds. Father G. continues "Why would we let that happen?" Another voice rises, "we committed to do it." "And why would anyone commit to do that?" the Priest asks. Silence...

Finally a woman speaks, "It's what Jesus would do." ... "What does the church smell like?" Father G. asks again. ... A man stands up, "commitment, it smells like commitment."

People begin to clap, a woman stands up, “The church smells like roses!” she shouts amid joyous hurrahs and dancing.

Tonight, we smell the feet from the dusty streets of Jerusalem. For many of us, in our sanitized world, it is an act of imagination to smell feet. It is an act of faith to taste the consecrated grape juice and bread and to remember this is a sign and a symbol of the blood and broken body of Christ. Tonight, Jesus reaches for our feet, and touches our very souls. We may find that Peter speaks for many of us as he exclaims to Jesus, “You will never wash my feet!” Peter speaks from humility yes, but does he not also speak from embarrassment, from shame? We do not want the Lord peering at our tarnished souls or touching our blemished feet. We are too exposed, and this act of foot washing is simply too intimate.

But in this prelude to the cross, Jesus, bending down, seeing us for who we are, Jesus “puts aside” his outer garment and washes our feet. Two chapters later, Jesus says “no one has greater love than this, to “put aside” or as we translate, “to lay down” one’s life for one’s friends.” You see, the two verses use the same Greek word /tith-ay-mee/-put aside. And so, seeing all the mess we have made of this world, Jesus lays aside his life and touches us. What can we make of this?

The mind gets tangled in theories of atonement. Rational discourse goes only so far when the subject is beyond the grasp of human rationality.But what name does a community use

when the smell of stinking dirty feet take on the fragrance of roses?

We ask, “how do we cover the great distance between our messed up world and God?” --only to find ourselves at the foot of the cross in the arms of Abba who declares through Christ, that in this life and the next, “I will not be without you.” Because, while we are still trying to hide our feet, trying to hide our sins, Christ has gone into that far country in our place. He has taken on our hunger, He has taken on our broken hearts, our loneliness, our pain. Christ has taken on the dirt of North Carolina politics, and the dirt of national politics. Christ has gone to Belgium.... He has washed the feet of Judas, and He has become small and broken, and has reconciled this world to the Lord with a boundless compassion we name “atonement.” Or, we could say Christ has taken on the smell of dirty feet, and coming to the cross, we find the scent has now taken on the fragrance of a most wondrous love.

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