



HOLY THURSDAY

CULTURAL RESOURCES

Thursday April 1, 2010

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I. The History Section

“Maundy Thursday,” now also commonly called Holy Thursday, comes from the story of Jesus washing the disciples’ feet in preparation for Passover. The term “Maundy” is derived from the Latin word “mandate” and can be translated as commandment. John 13 is one of the many narratives from the gospel of John that seeks to express how Jesus inverts the prevailing value systems of the dominant culture. Jesus’ leadership paradigm locates power and greatness in serving others. This servant-leadership model echoes

Jesus' words that "[t]he greatest among you is the one who serves." In John 13, Jesus makes an ethical choice to bend down and wash the feet of his disciples thus signifying the highest forms of both leadership and humility.

Professor Stephen Ray identifies another theological component to Jesus' act of foot washing: the importance of "embodied faith," in this case, with one's feet. Professor Ray makes the connection between foot washing and traveling to minister the "good news." The significance of foot washing symbolizes Jesus preparing the disciples for the long, arduous and dangerous journey of ministry in the Greco-Roman world.¹ Although today's scripture recounts the story of the betrayal of Jesus by Judas, it is significant for us to focus on the behavior of Jesus just before the betrayal. Although he clearly knows that he will be betrayed by a disciple, he begins by washing feet, including those of the one who will give him over to his enemies. What a lesson in times like these.

II. Feet As a Metaphor

Many have argued that traditional African-based religions do not make the separation between body and spirit or faith and action. Similar to Jesus, **the body is a script that bears witness to pain and joy, sorrow and hope.** Caught in the narrative symbols of crucifixion and resurrection, black bodies are a testament to historical constraints and conditions of possibility. To fully comprehend the religious imagination of the black church, one must critically examine the dramatic bodily rituals and performances akin to what W.E.B. Du Bois describes as the "frenzy" of black religious expression.² Beliefs are not abstract systems but dramatically lived out in passionate devotion, sublime spiritual strivings, as well as on the treacherous terrain of life.

What's the significance of feet in the black religious imagination? Feet are both a testimony to the difficulties of life's journey and the ability to endure it. In black religious imagination, feet are metaphors for "journey," "road" or "race," and they capture the many experiences of life. Arguably, few genres capture the symbolic significance of feet better than the African American literary tradition. Toni Morrison particularly comes to mind when considering the significance of "feet." In her work, feet relate to her preoccupation with "longing" and "homelessness."

Morrison's Beloved expresses how feet are testimony to one's strength and endurance. In Beloved, Sethe is pregnant and escapes (on foot) from the torture, abuse and rape of Sweet Home. Although her feet are swollen and largely unidentifiable, they become symbols of her stubborn persistence (running) and quest for freedom.³

In A Mercy, we are introduced to Florens, a traveler longing to find her lost love and a cure for a smallpox epidemic. Lina has something to say to Florens concerning the connection between feet and the harshness of life's journey:

The beginning begin with shoes. When a child I am never able
To abide being barefoot and always beg for shoes, anybody shoe's, even on
the hottest days. My mother, A minha mae, is frowning, is angry at What she

says are my prettify ways. Only bad women wear high heels. I am dangerous, she says, and wild but she relents and lets me wear the throw away shoes from Senhora's house, pointy-toe, one rased heel Broke the other worn and a buckle on top. As a result, Lina says, my feet Are useless, will always be too tender for life and never have the strong soles, Tougher than leather, that life requires.⁴

It is thus evident that feet represent within the African American cultural experience a testament to the unnecessary suffering in the world, yet highlight the persistence required to sustain strength to endure life's treacherous terrain.

III. The Feet of Sojourner Truth

The connection between feet and life's journey is further demonstrated in the life and service of Sojourner Truth. It is recorded on her birth certificate that her formal name was Isabella. According to Truth, "Isabella" internalized American slavery's vicious cycle of violence and domination. A biographer asserts that Isabella once "looked upon her master as a God; and believed that he knew of and could see her at all times, even as God himself."⁵ This statement was formed against the backdrop of Isabella's conundrum of deciding if she should return to slavery. Due to a religious conversation, Isabella sought to relieve herself from mental bondage by asking God to change her name. She went from Isabella to Sojourner Truth. For our purposes, the name Sojourner Truth represented her ministry as one that travels and speaks truth against the demonic structure of slavery. Truth asserts, "And the Lord gave me Sojourner, because I was to travel up and down the land, showing people their sins, and being a sign unto them. Afterward I told the Lord I wanted another name, because everybody else had two names; and the Lord gave me Truth, because I was to declare the truth to the people."⁶

Sojourner Truth's very name shaped her orientation to travel America preaching truth to power and moral goodness to evil and injustice. On her many sojourns, she faced cruelty and difficulty on life's journey from both white supremacists and the African American elites who were less than impressed with her "folk" spiritual sensibility. Yet, opponents and detractors failed to hinder her obligation from God. She embodied her faith in her feet and tongue as an itinerant abolitionist and fearless freedom fighter who sought to invert this nation's prevailing conceptions of race, gender and class. Just as Judas' intent toward Jesus did not stop him from washing the feet of Judas and continuing to his destiny, Truth's feet carried her into enemy territory and she never let the hate that desired to crucify her deter her from her destiny.

On this Holy Thursday, we march on. Betrayed by some, we march on. In love, because it is the highest act we know, we march on. Unbowed and undeterred by capitalism, racism, sexism, and all isms we march on. Convinced that God is on the side of those with swollen, bloodied, feet that bring the Gospel of good news, we march on.

IV. Songs That Speak to the Moment

The following songs convey that feet can be used as a metaphor to represent the paradox between historical limitations and human strivings to be victorious on each Maundy Thursday and dark Friday because the free soul/spirit knows that resurrection will come.

I Don't Feel No Ways Tired

I don't feel no ways tired
I've come too far from where I've started from.
Nobody told me that the road would be easy.
I don't believe He brought me this far to leave me.
I don't believe He brought me this far
I don't believe He brought me this far to leave me.⁷

Walk Together Children

Walk Together children, don't you get weary,
Walk together children, don't you get weary,
Walk together children, don't you get weary,
There's a great camp meeting in the Promised Land.

We're gonna walk and never tire,
Walk and never tire,
Walk and never tire,
There's a great camp meeting in the promised land.⁸

I Want Jesus to Walk with Me

(1) I want Jesus to walk with me,
I want Jesus to walk with me,
All along my pilgrim journey,
Lord, I want Jesus to walk with me.

(2) In my trials, Lord, walk with me
In my trials, Lord, walk with me,
When the shades of life are falling
Lord, I want Jesus to walk with me.⁹

V. Lessons for Congregations

- a. Church leaders and officials should wash the entire congregations' feet, if feasible and, if not, just pick a select few.
- b. Use John 13 to reflect on Jesus' leadership paradigm as rooted in love and service. Also, this leadership model can address the issue of evil in people, and especially systems, that are destructive.

VI. Conclusion

We acknowledge Holy Thursday/Maundy Thursday to critically reflect on finding ways in which we can serve humanity. This day allows us to call into question a popular societal view of leadership, which is rooted in crude authoritarianism and arrogance. Jesus demonstrated that real leadership is the ethical choice to lose oneself in the wilderness of service and love for those who badly need us and even for our enemies who see no need or use for us.

Notes

1. Ray, Stephen. Cultural Resource. "Holy Thursday." April 2009. Online location: <http://www.theafricanamericanlectionary.org/PopupCulturalAid.asp?LRID=78>
2. See, Book X, "On the Faith of Our Fathers." Du Bois, W. E. B. The Souls of Black Folks. New York, NY: Dodd, Mead, 1961.
3. Morrison, Toni. Beloved. New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2004. p. 39.
4. Morrison, Toni. A Mercy. New York, NY: Alfred Knopf Publishing, 2008. p. 4.
5. Gilbert, Olive. Narrative of Sojourner Truth. New York, NY: Arno Press, 1968. p. 33.
6. Ibid., p. 196.
7. "I Don't Feel No Ways Tired." African American Heritage Hymnal. Chicago, IL: GIA Publications. 2002 #414
8. "Walk Together Children." African American Heritage Hymnal. #541
9. "I Want Jesus to Walk with Me." African American Heritage Hymnal. #563