



HOLY THURSDAY

CULTURAL RESOURCES

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I. Introduction

The story of Jesus washing the disciples' feet on the eve of Passover is a powerful testimony to a theme that recurs throughout the Gospel accounts of his ministry: holiness and power are found in service. This theme has been a significant one throughout the history of the black Church—among those who wash feet before communion and those who do not. For what is behind this practice of re-memory of this story is that Jesus, Immanuel, thought it not robbery to take into his hands the feet of those who would soon carry the Gospel into all lands.

When Jesus was no longer with them, he would become the center of their theology -- a theology in which their feet were not used to follow him, per se, but, rather, to proclaim the good news of the kingdom that was inaugurated in him. The Book of Acts is the story of the apostles living their theology with their feet. This act of foot washing by Jesus

might then be seen as preparing the disciples for the work of living their theology with their feet. How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news (Rom. 10:15).

II. Black Folk Living Out Their Theology with Their Feet

This idea of living out personal and communal theology with one's feet has a powerful resonance in the history of the African-American community. For as long as African-Americans have claimed their personhood and grounded it in their sense of being children of God, they have often done so with their feet: feet that ran, feet that stood the storm, feet that shouted hallelujah, and feet that delivered.

One can imagine that, in the still of the dark night, when they were gripped with fear and trembling, our ancestors rejoiced at seeing and hearing the feet of Harriet Tubman coming through the evening mist. How beautiful must those feet have been and what good news they must have brought. Or, if we recall that great scene in the film *Glory* when the children in that hamlet in South Carolina first saw the dust, and then heard the sound of marching feet and then saw the 54th Massachusetts regiment coming their way. Recall the words of Morgan Freeman to the children in that scene: "Go tell your folks how Kingdom's come!"¹ We should further remember how reports from that war told of thousands of enslaved African-Americans who claimed their personhood with their feet by fleeing slavery and following the Union Army. These were all instances of a people, our people, hearing, responding to, and bearing the Good News with their feet.

III. My Feet Is Tired, But My Soul Is Rested

There are perhaps no more famous words to emerge from the touchstone of the modern Civil Rights Movement, than these: "My feet is tired, but my soul is rested."² These words uttered by an elderly African-American woman, Mrs. Pollard, as she strode with thousands of others during the Montgomery Bus Boycott gave witness to how she was expressing her faith, *speaking her theology*, with her feet. Throughout the years of the Movement, protestors marched in Albany, Georgia, Birmingham and Selma, Alabama, St. Augustine, Florida and in cities, villages, and hamlets throughout the nation. These marches, which most often began in the church, were all occasions in which African-Americans found their voice, their strength and their courage by walking their theology.

A colleague, Dr. Melva Costen, describes the Civil Right marches as the Church "taking flesh" in the street.³ Another colleague, Evelyn Parker, describes her childhood memories of Civil Rights workers in Hattiesburg, Mississippi in this way: "they seemed like *walking faith*." While this idea of people materializing their faith with their feet is not something exclusive to the history of the African-American Christian community, it is the case that this image bears a special meaning for us.

IV. Songs for This Moment

There is a storehouse of songs that advocate the message of serving feet. Songs such as "Ain't Gone Let Nobody Turn Me Around," the first verse of the famous Tindley song,

“Beams of Heaven,” and a twist on the famous hymn sung often throughout Easter season, “Were You There?” are but a few.

(a) Ain't Go Let Nobody Turn Me Around

Ain't gonna let nobody
Turn me around! Turn me around! Turn me around!
Ain't gonna let nobody turn me around
I'm gonna keep on a-walkin' keep on a-talkin'
Marchin' down to freedom's land!

Ain't gonna let no apathy...

Ain't gonna let oppression...

Ain't gonna let your violence...

Ain't gonna let nobody...

DON'T LET NOBODY TURN YOU
DON'T LET NOBODY TURN YOU AROUND! (REPEAT 5 TIMES)
I'M GONNA KEEP ON A WALKIN', KEEP ON A TALKIN'
KEEP ON A WALKIN', KEEP ON A TALKIN',
KEEP ON A WALKIN', KEEP ON A TALKIN',
MARCIN' DOWN TO FREEDOM'S LAND.⁴

(b) Beams of Heaven

Beams of heaven, as I go,
Through this wilderness below
Guide my feet in peaceful ways
Turn my midnights into days
When in the darkness I would grope
Faith always sees a star of hope
And soon from all life's grief and danger
I shall be free some day.

(c) Were You There?

1. Were you there when they crucified my Lord? (2x)
Oh, Oh. Sometimes, it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
2. Were you there when he knelt to wash their feet? (2x)
Oh, Oh. Sometimes, it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
Were you there when he knelt to wash their feet?
3. Are you here to serve others in Christ's name? (2x)
Oh, Oh. Sometimes, it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.

Are you here to serve others in Christ's name?

V. Making This a Memorable Learning Moment

- In our scripture for today, Jesus washed his disciples' feet during the Last Supper. So foot washing is appropriate for a Holy Thursday or Maundy Thursday service. Plan your worship service so that, either in the middle or toward the end of the service, opportunity is provided for foot-washing.
- It is not necessary that the feet of all present be washed, especially if there is a large crowd. Select persons can be chosen for this aspect of a worship service. These persons would be selected in advance and be prepared in advance. Always have children participate in any liturgical practice of the church. Select children to have their feet washed, and select older children who can assist in other ways in the foot-washing service.
- Also, if necessary, have several persons who participate as foot-washers along with the pastor. You will need chairs for those whose feet are being washed, several pitchers of warm water (as each person is to have water poured over their feet) and several foot basins. Towels should also be provided for each person as their feet are washed. If you elect to have a small service, then only one pitcher of water is needed and several foot basins and towels. Water will be poured over each individual's feet as the foot-washer moves from person to person. Remember, whether the ceremony is large or small, be sure to include children and youth.

You can conclude your service with the following prayer followed by music:

God, we have washed the feet of these believers as you washed the feet of the disciples. This act of humble service by you humbles us in our striving to be more like you.

As we shall leave this place, guide our feet in directions of peace, directions of righteous, directions of wisdom. Lead us to the doors, the doorways, and all of the locations of the needy. Let us not betray you by not carrying out your work. Let us not betray you by hiding our lights of love under a bushel. Let us not betray you by our lack of concern, our lack of courage and our lack of caring.

Thank you for leading our feet in the path of humble service. In the name of the one who considered it not robbery to stoop down to wash the feet of others, even our Lord, Jesus Christ, Amen.⁷

VI. Conclusion

As we recall these many stories of faith taking flesh through feet, we must never forget the rest of the biblical story. Jesus was preparing his disciples for the apparent cataclysm

which would be on the next day, Good Friday. He was strengthening and purifying them for the ultimate test of their faith. In so doing, he was also expressing a depth of love for them, including Judas, for which they were neither prepared nor did they immediately understand. At that point, it was enough that they received his love. So, each Holy Thursday/Maundy Thursday, as we remember this act of Jesus, this act of love, it may be well that we tarry with it for a bit. Before rushing too quickly to Golgotha or the empty tomb, perhaps it is well that we recall Jesus' love and service for and to us. For, we may indeed ask: would the disciples have been prepared, and will we be prepared for that time when it falls our lot to be the ones "whose feet are beautiful" because we are bearers of the Good News of Christ's love?

Notes

1. Drew's Script-O-Rama. Script excerpts from the movie Glory. Online location: http://www.script-o-rama.com/movie_scripts/g/glory-script-transcript-denzel-washington.html accessed 18 January 2009
2. Houck, Davis W. and David E. Dixon. Rhetoric, Religion and the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1965: Studies in Rhetoric and Religion. Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2006. p. 324
3. Costen, Melva. Convocation lecture. "Socio-Cultural Realities and a Vision of African American Worship into the Future." The Lutheran Theological Seminary, Philadelphia. 2 Oct. 2007. Download convocation podcast, online location: http://ltspmedia.ltsp.edu/2007_09_01_archive.html accessed 18 January 2009
4. "Ain't Gone Let Nobody Turn Me Around." See, "African American Civil Rights Songs." Cocojams. Online location: <http://www.cocojams.com/content/african-american-civil-rights-songs> accessed 18 January 2009
5. "Beams of Heaven." By Charles Albert Tindley
6. "Were You There." The Presbyterian Hymnal Hymns, Psalms, and Spiritual Songs. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990. #102
7. Foot washing ceremony and prayer provided by the African American Liturgical Team.