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Finding strength, community in the washing of feet

April Gutierrez | Apr. 17, 2014 Young Voices

"This is what I am asking you -- be shepherds with the smell of sheep." -- Pope Francis, March 28, 2013, during his homily at the Chrism Mass on Holy Thursday

Kneeling in front of my husband in my wedding dress with my hands shaking, I remember wondering if I was taking too long to get his socks off. Then I worried even more when trying to put them back on his dampened feet as we laughed together, nervously offering encouragement. I remember thinking that perhaps this is something we should have rehearsed, but I am grateful now to look back on the memories of that fumbling as a great source of strength in the difficult decisions we made since then -- in choosing to move from the part of the country we were living in or in receiving exciting news that our family is expanding.

As a young girl, washing one another's feet was never something that I included in my fantasies about my wedding day. I remember one Holy Thursday my mom wore nylons to church so she would have a reason not to go up and get her feet washed. Even though we know it is coming so we can prepare our feet with pedicures or a good scrubbing prior to entering, we often still do not want our dirtiness to be seen in our faith or by God. But this was a service I loved as a child because there was no other time when you could walk up the aisle in your bare feet!

It was not something I thought much about or heard much preaching on in Sunday school. Yet washing my husband's feet is the moment that I have returned to over the last 11 years more than any other as I seek strength for the journey in marriage.

My husband is a Methodist pastor's son, and we knew that we wanted to be married in the Catholic church I grew up in with his father co-presiding with my pastor. They worked well together, hammering out the specifics of who would bless the rings (Fr. Tom) and who would preach (my father-in-law). When it came to the Eucharist, I was torn. I did not want to begin our union before all who loved us by offering Communion for only some gathered. However, this was the center of my faith, and I did not know how to reconcile this. I am grateful that the tension provided an opportunity for us to talk more extensively about our priorities, the meaning behind our experience of Communion, and our relationship with the church.

The Gospel of John has a significant shift at the beginning of Chapter 13, when instead of focusing on Jesus' public ministry, it begins to concentrate on Jesus in an intimate setting with his disciples. Jesus invites all of us who desire to follow him to do so through acts of humility and great love. John's Gospel is unparalleled by the synoptic Gospels as he focuses on this profoundly simple act of love and not the meal shared. Jesus sits in an intensely humble place at the dirty feet of his friends, allowing for even our greatest places of shame and doubt to be held in his hands with tenderness and love. When a mentor suggested my husband and I wash one another's feet, it seemed quite fitting a resolution.

My husband and I chose to wash one another's feet during our wedding ceremony as a symbol of our love for each other and for our world. We wanted to honor that we were making a commitment that would require the support of our family and faith community as well as call us to live in love, looking beyond our own desires and

understanding our gifts to be used to better the world.

The actual experience was one of awkward grace with "The Servant Song" playing in the background. I could not focus on the greater meaning, but rather on how strange I might look and how I felt. We sang, "Pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant, too." The mutuality of this verse invites a level of vulnerability into our relationship with Jesus, how we are called to partnership and see it lived out so boldly in Pope Francis' invitation to "be shepherds with the smell of sheep."

As we move into the Triduum, we are intimately invited into the love and care of a Savior. Whether we held our Lenten promises or are still waiting to figure out what we might give up, the invitation is offered. May we walk boldly, offering grace, love and reconciliation to our world and our church this Easter season.

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