

Sent out

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [June 28, 2005](#) issue

The last stage of the worship liturgy clothes the congregation in the practices of faith so that its members make the whole world a Eucharist. Making the whole world a Eucharist means bringing all the practices of worship into a regular pattern of discipleship. It means extending God's invitation to all, bringing all to repentance and joining in creation's praise. It means proclaiming the truth of God through the history of the world and the dynamics of the universe and sharing discernment within the silence of God. It means articulating human need and enabling reconciliation. It means restoring a good relationship between humanity and its ecological home, stirring the heart, setting about work in a spirit of thanksgiving, discovering power under the authority of the Spirit, confronting evil with confidence in the sovereignty of God and sharing in the generous economy of God so that nothing is wasted. Thus all the practices of worship become the habits of discipleship.

The great mystery of contemporary liturgy is that one practice is often excluded: the washing of feet. If God's people do not embrace the whole of what worship involves, they are in no position to complain that they have not been given everything they need.

Washing feet enacts the incarnation, ministry and passion of Jesus. When Jesus gets down from his seat at the table (heaven), he takes off his outer robe (the trappings of divinity), clothes himself in a towel (humanity), ministers, teaches, prophesies, commands, discusses and confronts, and only then exchanges his incarnational towel for a divine robe and returns to his place at the heavenly table. Christians may perceive the significance of sacrifice in this moment: Jesus relinquishes the limitless range of options open to him and chooses a single path. It is more about Bethlehem than Calvary. Sacrifice is the consequence of following a call: it is an accounting for the roads not taken. Sacrifice is still an integral part of the Christian life, but it is not a pyre on which a first-born creature burns to appease an angry potentate. It is a sober estimate of the personal and corporate cost of following a distinct path and leaving the rest to God.

Washing feet brings together the water of baptism with the Eucharist meal. Not only does Jesus use water and suggest that washing one part of the body is tantamount to washing the whole; he also makes such a washing essential to being part of the community. As Jesus says, “One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean.” And all this takes place “during supper.”

When they wash each other’s feet, Christians embody the ministry of Christ in a concrete act of humble service. This act is inherently socially subversive, not so much in being deliberately confrontational but in its playful turning of the world upside-down. Here disciples discover that there is no fundamental hierarchy but simply a call to all Christians to attend to the most intimate, least attractive and most shameful gestures of mutual care. Footwashing is a model of interdependent community—subversive, playful, imaginative, physically (but not sexually) intimate, and faithful.

If “making the whole world a Eucharist” is too vague a commission, the place to start is by washing feet. Washing feet means human touch, and it challenges us to trust the encounters that gentle touch may provoke. It means refusing to fear taboos, daring to accompany shunned people, being willing to help people engage parts of themselves they would rather ignore. It means never seeing another person as beneath oneself, since he or she is never lower than Christ. As Archbishop Oscar Romero said, “Our task is to put feet on the gospel”: this task is never more appropriately performed than in washing feet.

In one congregation there was an elderly retired minister who had not been seen for a few days. The senior pastor called to see him and found that the old man’s bowels had given way, and there were discarded clothes and the results of diarrhea all over the house. The pastor considered who was to blame, who should take responsibility and how the man’s dignity could be rescued. Then he admitted to himself that his careful professional distance was an avoidance of his simple vocation. He got down on his knees, took soap and a towel and began to clean the apartment, the clothes and finally the old man himself.

Two other activities summarize the worship liturgy. A pastor’s blessing underlines all that’s happened in this encounter with God; the pastor’s “sending out” of worshipers expresses all that remains to be done. Blessing alludes to themes of creation and goodness; dismissal, to themes of transformation and vocation.

One church had a photograph of a golden retriever near the entrance. The photograph reminded the congregation that, like a puppy, it always discovered and rediscovered its mission in going out of the church and coming back. The dog's owner throws a stick or a ball into a lake, then both owner and dog experience delight in the adventures the dog has as it retrieves the item. God too throws something out from the gathered assembly, away into the neighborhood and wider world. Along with the members of the congregation, God enjoys the process by which the gift of word or gesture returns at the next Eucharist, with surprises and discoveries and insights attached to it.

This is the goal of mission: not only will the whole world be brought to worship God, be his friends and eat with him, but in the meantime the discoveries and surprises of mission and ministry will enrich the church so it can enjoy and use the gifts God has given it. Being sent out is about creating a virtuous circle of mission, practice, discovery, reflection, worship and renewed mission.

The mission statement of the church is to make the world a Eucharist. So faithful service means practices that look like worship—those that gather people and form them as one body, that reconcile and open lives to repentance and forgiveness, that proclaim truth and reveal God's story, that embrace need and unleash gifts, that express thanks and are open to the Holy Spirit, that share food and wash feet. These are the practices of God's reign. All are embodied in worship.