

Tender ministry

Finally, Mom put the phone down. She took a large basin and placed our nicest guest towels in it. "Carol!" she yelled. "Let's go!"

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#) in the [October 3, 2012](#) issue



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"I saw him in the parking lot with her. I think he wanted to get caught."

My mom's hushed voice bled with betrayal. Unlike most gossip, this phone conversation didn't have the quality of a listener hungry for salacious trivialities. It was more like being entangled in a highway wreck, not wanting to know the devastation but having to face it anyway. As I sat in the adjoining room, straining to hear, the whole house felt on edge.

I was 15 years old. I had missed church that Sunday morning but was catching up with what happened in the service by listening to my mom's side of her phone conversations. Dressed in T-shirt and shorts, she walked back and forth with bare feet on the cork kitchen tile, reciting assorted facts and collecting others. The instant Mom hung up the phone, it would ring again.

The pieces came together. Our pastor confessed in his sermon that he'd been having an affair. He stood up and let the gathered members know that he had been tempted—just like Jesus in the wilderness—but he was ready to “just move on.”

The shocked congregation was not so ready to move on. They wanted details. They demanded to know exactly what had happened, with whom and for how long. The elders and the pastor scheduled a meeting to take place that evening. As the sun went down, my father left for the gathering of leaders, and my mother hung up the phone.

Mom paced the kitchen a few more times, but she didn't pick up the receiver again. Instead, she took a large basin and placed our nicest guest towels inside of it. Then she yelled out to the quiet house, “Carol! Let's go!”

The warm Florida night swelled with the sound of crickets singing and waves crashing. We drove for half an hour, from the beach to the mainland, till we got to our pastor's home. When we pulled up to the driveway, the house was dark. It seemed empty, but this did not deter my mom. She gathered the basin and towels and rang the doorbell.

I don't remember anyone letting us in the door, but somehow we entered. There was Margaret, the pastor's wife, sitting on a chair in her living room. She remained motionless in the dark room, staring at her lavish white carpet, breathing deeply.

Years earlier, when I saw their house for the first time, I couldn't imagine that anyone could take care of white carpeting. When I got to know Margaret, I realized that she was the type of person who could. She had a gracious perfection that made us admire her, though without feeling ashamed of our own flaws.

My mother took the basin, walked into her friend's kitchen and filled it with warm water. She carried it to Margaret's feet, removed her shoes and cradled her soles as if they were the most precious things in the world. Without a word, mom placed Margaret's feet in the water and began to wash them. Margaret started to cry, and tears quickly smeared each of our faces. My mother turned to me and nodded, so I got down on my knees and cupped my hand, making sure that Margaret's feet were soaked with water.

No one was talking, but we knew what was being said. And even at my young age, I understood the depth of it. Margaret was about to face the worst kind of public

betrayal, as people began to pick apart the details of her husband's indiscretions. The intimate facts of the affair would be drawn out for every member of the congregation to see.

Mom placed the towels next to the basin. She gently removed Margaret's feet and dried them on the plush towels.

I moved the basin and stared at the inch-thick carpet. I knew that the fact that Margaret seemed so flawless would work against her. Those who had seethed with envy in the past would derive a twisted delight in her ruin.

As if detailing the story of her husband's duplicity were not enough, people would call Margaret's own character into question as well. They would whisper about how they would never put up with such a thing. Some would even wonder aloud whether Margaret herself was the reason her husband had been unfaithful. Perhaps she was too frigid, so her husband had to find love elsewhere.

In the midst of the painful exposure, Margaret would sort out what she was going to do about her marriage, without the benefit of privacy. While hearing more details than she could bear, Margaret would have to evaluate everything in her life—her friends, the lies, her reputation, her dignity, her children and her finances.

In the midst of all this, Mom wanted Margaret to know one thing: she would be cherished, even to the ends of her toes.

My faith was formed that day. It was not shaped by my pastor's bitter betrayals, capricious cover-ups or twisted deceit. It was the water that molded me. As water flowed freely over rough, knowing flesh, as it moved from the basin to Margaret's feet and as it salted our faces with tears, I experienced a sacred love that infused every drop.