

CHAPTER 7

THE LOVE FEAST

The Love Feast is one of the most significant worship services Church of the Brethren congregations share throughout the course of the year. Based on the account of Jesus' celebration of the "Last Supper" in John 13, Church of the Brethren congregations typically celebrate the Love Feast on Maundy Thursday of Holy Week¹ and perhaps one other time each year. As you will learn, this worship service includes a time of spiritual examination, footwashing, a simple meal, and communion.

As we have noted before, the reasons Brethren live their faith in certain ways usually isn't complicated—if Jesus said that we should do something (or not do something) then Brethren have tried to follow that teaching. That is certainly true of the Love Feast. In John 13:14 Jesus says "So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet." For the early Brethren, that one verse was enough for them to wash one another's feet. Hopefully it can be for you, too.

- 1. Have you ever been to a Love Feast service? Based on what you know at this point, how does the idea of washing someone else's feet seem to you?**

- 2. As you read John 13:1-17 this week, notice how Peter responded to Jesus attempt to wash his feet. Why do you think Peter protested?**

¹ Maundy Thursday is the Thursday prior to Easter Sunday. The word "Maundy" is from the Latin *mandatum*, referring to Jesus' commandment to the disciples to wash one another's feet.

The pattern for Love Feast

The Love Feast worship service has four parts. Our congregation begins worship in the Sanctuary where we spend fifteen to twenty minutes examining our lives through silence, spoken prayers, and hymns. The purpose of this time is to allow the Holy Spirit to reveal any unresolved sin in our lives. We often consider questions like: In what ways are we not faithful to Jesus? Is there any unresolved conflict between myself and another member of the church? Am I still faithfully serving the congregation in the way I promised at my baptism? Are there new ways I might serve God, my church, or my community?

After this, we move into the Fellowship hall for footwashing. Men sit on one side of the room and women sit on the other. We then take off our shoes and socks while several of our deacons wrap a towel around their waist, and kneel down in front of the person sitting next to them. The deacons wash this persons feet with water and then dry them with a towel. The two persons then shake hands, exchange a hug, and often say “I love you, Brother” or “I love you, Sister.” The person whose feet were washed then kneels in front of the person sitting next to them and repeats the process.

Because some people are not physically able to kneel down for footwashing, we also have handwashing stations, where persons follow a similar pattern to that described above.

Next is a meal—typically roast beef, bread, beef broth and fruit. Our meal is intentionally simple and somewhat different from other times when we eat together; this

is a time to eat while having quiet conversation with those sitting at the table with us, considering what it might have been like to sit at the table with Jesus.

The Love Feast concludes with the bread and cup of communion. Sharing these symbols of Jesus' body and blood are also copied from the Gospels, where Jesus invited the disciples to fully join in his kingdom work. By sharing the bread and the cup we are promising once again to follow Jesus wherever he leads, whatever the cost. We gladly accept our place in Jesus' family.

Many persons find the Love Feast service to be a very significant time of worship, and it is the highlight of the year for them. Other people respond to the idea of footwashing much like Peter did in John 13: they aren't very sure about it; it makes them feel uncomfortable; and they wonder why it should be expected of them.

If you find yourself with mixed feelings about the Love Feast, then you're probably not alone. Others do, too. And no one should be expected to come to Love Feast just because someone else finds the traditions meaningful. So let's press deeper and find out why this particular faith practice is important to us. But you'll have to hang on! This story might seem to go on an unexpected detour. Please be patient, we'll all end up in the same place together.

A lesson from an unfamiliar part of the New Testament

Paul's letter to Philemon probably seems like a strange detour in a chapter on Love Feast. But the dynamics in this short letter illustrate an important truth of the Christian faith.

Before you read this short letter, consider the backstory. Philemon is a member of a house church in the city of Colossae. It might be (this isn't entirely clear) that the church meets in his home. What is clear is that Philemon owns at least one slave—a man named Onesimus. These two clues suggest that Philemon is a man of financial means. Among first century Christians, this was somewhat unusual.

At some point before this letter was written, Onesimus ran away from Philemon. Under Roman law, this was a capital crime, and Philemon could have Onesimus put to death for this. But while Onesimus was on the run, he met the Apostle Paul and became a Christian. Paul was evidently in need of some help, so Onesimus stayed with him, and the two men became very close friends and brothers in Christ.

But for both legal and spiritual reasons, this arrangement could not last. Onesimus and Philemon's relationship needed to be reconciled, and Onesimus' status as a runaway slave needed to be dealt with. So at great risk to Onesimus, Paul sends him back to Philemon, carrying this letter with him.

With that background in mind, read Paul's letter to Philemon and consider this question:

3. What is Paul asking Philemon to do? How difficult will it be?

Paul's letter is forceful, creative, and probably somewhat manipulative. Consider that it is likely that the letter was read out loud in front of the congregation. Paul asks Philemon to receive Onesimus back—not as a slave, but as a brother in Christ. In order to help convince Philemon of this, Paul mentions that he is “an old man,” a “prisoner of Christ Jesus” and that he wants Philemon to “prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through **your** prayers to be restored to you.” In other words, Paul is coming to visit to make sure Philemon does what he wants.

This is a fascinating letter. And in spite of Paul's strong-handed argument to Philemon, the point of the letter is this: Philemon can no longer view his relationship with Onesimus on the world's terms. The fact that Onesimus is a slave no longer has any bearing. The only thing that matters is that Onesimus and Philemon are now Christians. The terms of their relationship are to be governed by the New Testament, not Roman law.

This is true of all relationships within the church, and it is a beautiful thing to consider. In the midst of a world that seems increasingly fractured and contentious, the New Testament shows us another way of living where the things that typically divide us are no longer have any influence. It is exciting to imagine the potential of harmonious relationships within the church family.

It seems exciting, that is, until you consider how difficult it has been for Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland to get along, or Hutu's and Tutsi's in Rwanda, or

Americans of any color or ethnic origin or social class or education level. We are constantly tempted to organize ourselves into groups of people “just like us,” all the while forgetting that Jesus died for all of us, not just some of us.

As if this weren't challenge enough, our days are filled with news media, social media, and clever marketing that is aimed at our lower brain, “fight or flight” instinct which further divides us into different “tribes.” Social media stories are filtered by complex algorithms based on other content we have read or “liked.” Perhaps most of us are guilty of being drawn to news stories and perspectives that confirm what we already believe instead of challenging our deeply held assumptions. The red notification button on Facebook and Twitter alerts us to stories and comments others have “liked.” While our shared baptism ought to bring us together, our shared culture tries to pull us apart.

It is difficult to imagine that Philemon and Onesimus would have been Facebook friends. But that's not the issue. They are both Christians, and their relationship must now be viewed on different terms.

This is why we wash feet. As human beings, we need a physical reminder of our spiritual connections and obligations. We are part of a church family made up of people who each have different interests, talents, backgrounds, personalities, ethnic origins, and annual salaries. When we come to footwashing, however, we don't sit next to people based on any of these interests. We simply take our seat and wash the feet of the brother or sister sitting near us.

When we participate in footwashing, we are choosing the role of a servant, kneeling at the feet of another person and saying “you are more important than I am. I will gladly seek what is best for you.” We do this knowing that someone will also do this for us. We might need to swallow our pride, but that might be the best thing we can do!

Imagine how awkward it would be to wash the feet of someone you’d recently argued with on Facebook, or someone whose job you consider “beneath you.” It would certainly be easier to stay home. But how might your own prejudices be challenged and sins confessed if you follow Jesus all the way to Love Feast and pay good attention to the person sitting near you? Perhaps our hearts would be changed, and we would find ourselves becoming more like Jesus—the exact thing Jesus hopes for in each of us.

How does the Love Feast service—and especially the footwashing—seem to you after considering this lesson? Does the physical reminder of a spiritual belief seem important to you?