

Super Bowl Ad



John 13:12 After (Jesus) had washed (the disciples') feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, 'Do you know what I have done (for) you? You call me Teacher and Lord -- and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. . . If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.'"

During the Super Bowl this year, a 60-second advertisement aired about Jesus, and no one seemed more upset about it than the Christians. The ad depicted a series of images of one person washing another person's feet. Each pairing though seemed highly

controversial. An oil rig worker washed the feet of a climate activist. A white cop washed the feet of a young Black man. An older woman washed the feet of a young woman outside an apparent abortion clinic, while anti-abortion protesters look on. A priest washed the feet of a young L.G.B.T.Q. man. And as the commercial ended, words appeared on the screen: "Jesus didn't teach hate. He washed feet."

The ad came from a group called *He Gets Us* that is running a multimillion-dollar ad campaign with the aim of essentially reintroducing Jesus to the American public. Its website asks, "How did the story of a man who taught and practiced unconditional love become associated with hatred and oppression for so many people?" The constant theme of the group's ads is that Jesus knows you and loves you.

But not everyone loved the ads though. My liberal friends asked whether it's appropriate for Christians to spend such a large sum of money, 7 million dollars, on an ad campaign when it could have been spent instead, for instance, providing food or shelter to those in need, critics who sounded a bit like the disciples after the woman with the alabaster jar anointed Jesus' feet, disciples who then questioned whether the ointment might have been better sold and the money given to the poor.

The group *He Gets Us* has also come under fire because some people distrust the funders (which include the founder of Hobby

Lobby), noting that they've also funded conservative Christian legal causes. Americans United for Separation of Church and State goes so far as to call the ads "a front for Christian nationalism."

Yet if that's true, someone forgot to tell the religious right. The more radically right-wing cohort of Christians were just as furious at the ad, and they've stayed furious for days, calling the ads heretical, "Putting out an ad that invites narcissistic, prideful, unrepentant sinners to come and get their feet washed is bad," one said. Another critic noted that the "Christ-like thing to do at an abortion center isn't to wash an abortion-minded girl's feet while ignoring their murderous intentions. The Christ-like thing to do is to call them to repentance."

But all that right-wing anger at the ad may offer a hint as to its true target. Far from making a stealth case for Christian nationalism, the ads are making a rather blatant case to *Christians* that perhaps Jesus would not play the culture-warrior role they imagine he would. This is especially true of the Super Bowl ad, which refers to the story of foot-washing known primarily to Christians.

In John 13, Jesus humbled himself, washed his disciples' feet and then instructed them, "you also should wash one another's feet," an admonition that many Christians like us take

quite literally. Foot washing as a humbling act is a staple in countless churches on this night. Thus, the ad seems to ask, I believe, "Are we willing to be shamed for our associations?" In other words, are we willing to risk shame and isolation for loving those on the other side of the political and religious aisle? Are we, like Jesus, willing to love others even if it causes people to hate us? Are we willing to love others even if they haven't repented of what we believe to be grievous sins?

It's one thing to possess the courage to say what we believe, but it takes immeasurably more courage to truly love people who we've often been told to hate – even and especially if they don't love us back. There is nothing distinctive about boldly declaring our religious beliefs. Many people do that. But how many people actually love their enemies?

That's what the Super Bowl ad is communicating, I believe. It's not saying there's no difference between the cop and the young Black man, or between the oil rig worker and the climate activist – or that they shouldn't speak about their differences. It's saying something far more radical and more valuable: I can love you and serve you *even when I disagree with you*. Kindness is not conditioned on first accepting our understanding of Jesus' teaching. Jesus was in fact hated for the amount of time he spent with the despised and the marginalized. In Matthew 9,

for example, the Pharisees angrily asked Jesus's disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

The older I get, the more I reject the "bold declaration" model of Christian engagement in favor of prioritizing courageous demonstration instead. Why should anyone listen to our declarations, anyway? How many "bold" pastors have been exposed over the years as liars, frauds, and abusers?

One commentator, however, was reminded of a story that made an indelible impact on him when he was a young law student and experiencing his first year outside of his fundamentalist bubble of 'bold declarations,' when an evangelist and professor named Tony Campolo came to speak to his Christian fellowship. The story he told helped reframe his life.

Campolo was eating out very late in an all-night diner when a group of women came inside who were obviously prostitutes. One of the women, named Agnes, said her birthday was the next day and casually observed that she'd never had a birthday party in all her life. Campolo overheard the conversation, and asked a man behind the counter if the women came in every night. He said yes.

The next night, Campolo brought some simple decorations, hung them up, and threw Agnes a surprise party in that diner. She cried tears of joy and ended up taking the cake home, untouched. For it was the first birthday cake she had ever

received. After she left, Campolo prayed with the people who remained in the diner, and one of the employees asked him what kind of church he belonged to.

Campolo's answer was perfect: He said he belonged to the kind of church that gives a party for a prostitute at 3:30 a.m. Not, obviously, because he approved of prostitution. But because he cared for Agnes. He threw that party for her before he knew how she'd respond, before he knew whether she'd leave the streets, and before he'd had a chance to say anything at all to her about Jesus. The party itself spoke to her more loudly than any words could have.

In the year 125 A.D., a Greek philosopher named Aristides attempted to explain Christianity to the Roman Emperor Hadrian. Here's how he literally described those early Christians, "They love one another. They never fail to help widows. They save orphans from those who would hurt them. If they have something, they give freely to the one who has nothing. If they see an immigrant, they take him into their homes and rejoice over him as a brother." I know very few people who would describe us Christians the same way today. We have fallen so far. Lord, have mercy upon us. Something needs to change.