

SERMON- Lent 1(B)

Charles R. Cowherd

Genesis 9:8-17

1 Peter 3:18-22

Mark 1:9-15

St. Timothy's (Herndon)

February 18, 2024

Psalm 25:1-9

OPENING:

Last week's Super Bowl broadcast was watched by a record 123 million people. I have promised my wife that I will one day do a sermon about Taylor Swift, but not today, I wanted to talk instead about one of the commercials that aired during the Super Bowl.

It was entitled "He Gets Us" and featured a montage of a series of people washing other people's feet, modern-day images recreating Jesus' act with the Disciples on the night before his death.

The commercial generated no small amount of interest and it has been on my mind this week.

Lent began on Ash Wednesday with the imposition of Ashes;

Lent ends around Maundy Thursday with the ritual of Footwashing.

It will take most of us our entire lives to figure out the deep symbolism, the mystery, the truth of these ancient customs.

A one-minute long commercial during a football game probably will only disrupt our collective understanding of why Jesus and the Church do these things.

But so be it. Let's give it a shot.

COMMERCIAL

I apologize if you did not see the commercial then or since, if you were not one of the record 123 million.

I will try to describe it to you now but know that I have posted it on the church's Facebook page and a link will be included in this sermon as well.

In short, you see a series of images, provocative in nature in which:

First a son washes a father's feet,

then a Hispanic policeman washes an African American male

next a Highschool cheerleader washes a Goth classmates

An anti-abortion activist with a teenage mother.

A caregiver with an elderly alcoholic

A oil driller with an Environmentalist

A suburban Mom with a migrant bussed into the neighborhood from the border.

A Red-Stater washes a woman wearing a Muslim headdress

And finally a priest washes the feet of someone who might be gay,

There were more than this, and it does not sound very subtle as I recount it, but it was beautiful, all in this one-minute commercial.

And it ends with the words:

“Jesus didn’t teach hate.

He washed feet.”¹

REACTION:

What happened next was that everyone had an opinion and voiced it on the internet.

Those on the left of the political spectrum did not like it because the commercial was funded by the conservative family that owns Hobby Lobby.²

Those on the right of the political spectrum did not like it because the commercial seemed to be pushing an inclusive agenda, diverse and tolerant.

Those on both sides did not like it because they said that that organization could have washed a lot of feet, metaphorically, with the \$17 million that it cost to spend on those ads. That is, a lot of people took the position of modern-day Pharisees and said where the money could be better spent. We all so easily become Judases complaining about how Jesus is wasting the expensive perfume washing his feet.

CALENDAR:

What should we make of this on this 1st Sunday of Lent?

What do we do with *that* Jesus, with **our** Jesus? Put on a national stage in such a way.

As we begin our Lenten Journey, we are tempted to join this convulsion of political infighting, we are tempted to demonize our political opponents.

In other words, we have wild beasts to contend with, even as we yearn for angels to tend to us.

Jesus knows all about it.

It had been the best day of his life, in our Gospel reading. John had baptized him and the world was all in front of him.³ There is this moment where the dove descends and things are looking up, but suddenly and immediately he is driven into the wilderness.

The anti-climax of Mark’s Gospel is that when Jesus gets his powers, he then retreats. Our expectations are subverted.

¹ [What is foot washing and what does it symbolize? - He Gets Us](#)

² [Jesus Super Bowl Ads: Hobby Lobby Family Leads He Gets Us Campaign \(rollingstone.com\)](#)

³ Taylor, Barbara Brown. 2001. “Four Stops in the Wilderness.” *Journal for Preachers* 24 (2): 4.

The anti-climax of our Church calendar is the same: we have celebrated God's Incarnation and this remarkable Epiphany, last week we have the Transfiguration, but then we have to join Jesus in the wilderness during Lent.

And finally we also have the anticlimax of the Super Bowl, the last occasion for our monoculture where folks come together to enjoy a game... and we get this (and your Rector decides to try to handle this political hot potato.)

COMMERCIAL

So, what do I have to say about this Super Bowl commercial?

First, in it and the reaction to it, Jesus seems to do exactly what he did in his life. He confounds, and surprises people.

The foot-washing was the least of it; he took aim at the hypocrites and challenged notions of giving and worshipping and living. He enrages people with these acts of kindness and humility. It was unconscionable to be doing what he was doing. He was so repellent and so attractive at the same time.

Jesus' very being promotes this *crisis*... while also drawing the whole world to him, inexorably. The political parties of the day did not know what to do with Jesus, so they hung him from a cross. 2000 years later, we still are drawn to him and confounded.

God is always doing the strangest things. A good rule of thumb comes from Nadia Bolz Webber's who had this line in one of her books: "the thing that sucks is that every time we draw a line between us and others, Jesus is always on the other side of it."⁴

Second thing on the commercial, Fred Rogers did it better.

You might recall the famous scene in "Mister Roger's Neighborhood" where Mr. Rogers invites a black police officer, named Francois Clemmens, to share an outdoor kiddie swimming pool and wash their feet together.

It was May 1969, swimming pools in this country were still segregated and racial tensions had gripped the country a year earlier, and Fred Rogers, an ordained Presbyterian minister... and maybe the closest we have to Jesus in the 20th century, decided to film that scene.

It's a truly stunning video to watch. I have posted it as well; Rogers' gentleness, his love, his wisdom, complete lack of guile as he washes the feet just shines through.⁵

⁴ Nadia Bolz-Weber. 2013. *Pastrix : The Cranky Beautiful Life of a Sinner & Saint*. New York: Jericho. 57

⁵ [Sharing a wading pool \(1969\) - Mister Rogers' Neighborhood:](#)

Third thing on the commercial:

“He gets Us” is the name of the campaign and you see it advertised in billboards at basketball games and everywhere else. I am kinda rooting for them to be honest. I don’t know, though, if I would have chosen “He gets us” to describe Jesus though. I would have gone with

“He loves us”

“He abides us”

“He is there for us.”

“He saves us”

He gets us is good, maybe a little too psychological, a little too “Jesus is my friend” It comes out of the great, individualistic effort of modernity, that I need to be understood, me, me, me. It’s okay, but not my choice

CONCLUSION

We don’t get to pick though... Jesus always surprises us.

On the night before he died, I wish that Jesus had done some different things: maybe a little bit more about how to get people to come to church in a secular age, maybe a little bit more about why bad things to good people and why do we suffer. maybe a little bit more about what happens after we died.

Instead he broke bread and washed feet.

I will end with this:

Fred Rogers recreated that scene of the Footwashing with the Francois Clemmens years later and it was featured on the documentary *Won't You Be My Neighbor?*⁶

In the documentary, Clemmens says he never forgot the day Rogers wrapped up the program, as he always did, by hanging up his sweater and said, “You make every day a special day just by being you I love you just the way you are.”

Clemmens said to Rogers “what are you talking to me?”

and he looked at me and he said “yes I've been talking to you for two years and you finally heard me today.”

and Clemmens said: I just collapsed into his arms and I started crying that's when I knew that I loved him. No man had ever told me that he loved me like that. I needed to hear it all my life. My dad never told me so from then on Fred Rogers became my surrogate father.⁷

What does that sound like?

⁶ [1993 Recreation of the Scene from Won't You Be My Neighbor? \(2018\) - I Love You Just The Way You Are Scene](#)

⁷ [Mister Rogers' Neighborhood Policeman Pal Officer Clemmons Tells His Life Story : NPR](#)

Jesus shows up in so many different ways: washing feet, crossing lines, saying he
Gets Us
He confounds us
He surprises us
He loves us
He saves us.

AMEN