

“Love” - Stephanie Sorge - 3.1.26

I was speaking with a colleague a few days ago about our trip to India. She had been with a group from Union Presbyterian Seminary a few years back. We agreed that the hospitality was unrivaled by any experience before or since. We may have already mentioned Hamitha’s wonderful cooking, which I still miss. (Picture 1 - table) Being served such delicious food, having had no part in preparing it and no responsibility for cleaning up, was a luxury that took some getting used to, but we received it as the generous expression of love and hospitality that it was. I also noticed that we were the only ones using the American-style cups, plates, and silverware, and I’m guessing that those and other things - even table and chairs - had been procured before our visit to make us more comfortable in the cultural transition. Throughout the visit, we were treated as honored guests, while also being made to feel at home with our new friends.

The welcome started with our arrival at the airport in Visakhapatnam. (Picture 2 - airport) Haresh, Hamitha, and Hamitha’s family were there, ready to greet us with beautiful flower garlands. When we first met the children at the Mercy House, (picture 3 - kids) they also had garlands for each of us, as well as welcome signs, written by the older children, in English. Each child then approached each of us, bowing low and touching our feet as they did so. Haresh

explained it was a sign of honor and blessing, and we certainly felt both honored and blessed.

Both of the house churches we visited placed even more flower garlands around our necks. (Picture 4 - second group) As we tumbled out of the vehicle at the first house church, we were also showered with flower petals. (Picture 5 - petals) One woman carried a basin with water and flowers in it, and Haresh explained that they wanted to wash our feet. We were running behind schedule, so he had to tell them we didn't have enough time. I'm sorry we didn't.

Our Gospel reading is the opening scene in John's extended Last Supper narrative. This long farewell discourse starts with love - "having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them fully, to the end," it ends with love, and in between? Love. Jesus will say many times, in many ways, that they are to love one another, as he has loved them. But before he gets to those quotable verses, he puts that love in action by bending down and washing their feet.

Washing the feet of visitors was a common practice in Jesus's time. It was a practical sign of hospitality, usually done by servants in the house. In taking the cloth and basin himself, Jesus rejected dominant human power dynamics in favor of the mutuality of servant leadership. He erased the hierarchy of service. He admonished his disciples to serve in the same way, not to think they were greater than others, just because they were friends of Jesus. They should follow his

example of service, and also be ready to take the vulnerable position of having their own feet washed.

That's why I was sorry not to have had the opportunity to have our feet washed at the first house church. If the women had taken Jesus's position, it would have reinforced the fact that we were not only there to serve, but to be served, as equally beloved children of God. Truth be told, we were served throughout the trip. Because of your generosity, we were able to do some helpful things, but we received so much more in return.

While there wasn't footwashing on our trip, there were plenty of bare feet! (Pic 6 - shoes at night) The night we arrived, we saw the shoes of the children and caregivers, Gudi and Atu. Each little pair of shoes represented a child who was warm, safe, and who had gone to bed with a full stomach and happy heart. (Pic 7 - Batman) The next day, as I removed my shoes, I placed them beside another, smaller pair. These are shoes my boys might have worn when their feet were that small, too! I promise, I didn't take pictures of all the shoes I saw, but on our last full day in Nabarangpur, when we were finally able to meet all of the children Hareh and Hamitha have been working with, I couldn't resist one more. (Picture 8 - so many shoes) I know that many of those shoes - maybe all of them - were provided through your generosity. Having seen where some of these children lived,

it was also hard knowing that they would be returning to the same vulnerable situations.

We are connected to each of those children. We were connected to them before we landed in India, and before Haresh and Hamitha ever joined us in worship. We are connected to them because we are the body of Christ together. Now we've seen their faces, and we know their names. We truly are the church together. (video)

The farewell discourse can almost be captured in just one word: love. Jesus knew this was his final sermon, his concluding lecture. If the disciples forgot everything else, he wanted them to know this: God loves you. I love you. Love each other. It's just doctrine or theory; it's lived out, here and now, in earthy, bodily ways. It's caring about, and helping to meet, the physical needs of neighbors. It's erasing the lines between who serves and who is being served. It's being honest enough to know we can't make it through this life alone, and vulnerable enough to receive what we need from others.

Love is this meal, reminding us that Jesus held nothing back. Love is this table, where Jesus is host. Love expands this table far beyond the confines of our sanctuary and our imagination. Here we receive love, and from here, we are sent to share it. May we be strengthened by this meal to share God's love - here, in Nabarangpur, and everywhere in between. Amen.