

Bermudian Church of the Brethren

WEDNESDAY'S WORD – a midweek thought from Pastor Larry M. Dentler

to share a word of inspiration ... encouragement ... challenge ... a smile ... in the middle of your week

July 17 in the year of our Lord 2019 - #796

The Empty Foot Tub

This year was the 233rd recorded Annual Conference of the Church of the Brethren. We gathered in Greensboro, NC for our “Big Meeting.” For those reading this who may not be familiar with the Church of the Brethren, we make our decisions as congregations, Districts and denomination by the Acts 15 model where the big decisions of the Church are not made by leadership but by the Body. Listening for God’s guidance, listening to the counsel of Scripture, and listening to each other. So this year 2155 of us, men, women & children; laity & clergy; from congregations large & small; from all over the U.S. and the world ...gathered for the Lord’s work.

When this year’s Moderator, Sister Donita Keister (of our Southern PA District’s Buffalo Valley congregation near Mifflinburg) announced that this year we would hold Love Feast as part of Annual Conference ... I was intrigued. [Love Feast is the way Brethren celebrate Holy Communion: with a time of examination (1 Corinthians 11:28), a time of feet washing (John 13:14-15), a simple meal & Holy Communion (Luke 22:14-20) ...each part guided & informed by Scripture.] I know Love Feast would have been common at Annual Conference meetings generations ago ... but never in my lifetime since we have moved off the farm and into big city Conference Centers. How would they pull off the details?

They did wonderfully! They asked for donations of Brethren recipe unleavened communion bread to be brought to Conference, and Pastor Georgia led a Bermudian group in making a batch for Conference. They asked for homemade loaves of bread for the Love Feast meal. They came from all over. They asked for galvanized foot tubs to be loaned for the Foot Washing and the tubs were carried in. It was a marvelous display of the Brethren laboring together.

Early in the Conference they shared that the Convention Center had denied the request to actually fill these hundreds of foot tubs with water. I get it. Liability and all. And they shared that instead we would wash feet with large “baby wipe” type pre-moistened cloths. See Larry’s eyes roll!!!!

Our business for the week was working on the next step in the Compelling Vision process with the intent of producing a “Vision” that Brethren from all theological perspectives can get excited about. We sat at round tables with eight other Sisters & Brothers. One-hundred forty-one tables full! Each table had an I-Pad. As we responded to the questions a scribe from our table typed our responses into the I-Pad. Instantly the Compelling Vision Task Force seated at the front of the Convention Center had all the input and could put trends up on the big screens. Sometimes they might say, *“Here are the top 10 answers, now each person at the table take the I-Pad and vote for your top 3.”* Instantly you could see on the big screens the results. Impressive use of technology for the Kingdom!

Some of the questions and discussions were intense. *“What is your ‘elephant in the room?’”* At my table were persons from a more conservative position like myself, some from more progressive positions, some more moderate. We didn’t always agree but we worked well together. One young

woman, a college student attending medical school, was from a more liberal church. I was happy for her young voice at our table and at a Conference full of gray hairs, even though many things she said were difficult for me.

As the week rolled on I was asked MANY times by conservative friends if I was going to participate in Love Feast. Many conservatives and evangelicals were deciding they could not participate. I understood completely. They often quoted the *“be not yoked with unbelievers”* words of 2 Corinthians 6:14. I get it. I’m not trying to throw anyone under the bus here!! I wrestled. But when asked I always responded the same way, *“Yes, I think I am going to participate. Because I cherish Love Feast and want to honor my Lord. And if Jesus could wash the feet of Judas who was about to betray Him, and Peter who was about to deny Him ... then I can wash the feet in love ... one sinner to another ... of anyone the Lord sits before me.”* Again not trying to defend my position. Not saying it was the right decision. Not saying it was the better decision. Simply saying that this was my decision.

When the afternoon came for the Love Feast. My young medical student tablemate showed up to our table with her prayer covering on. The Lord convicted me of my judgmental heart. I looked around the room and saw all the empty “conservative” seats. I became very emotional. I wept. When it was time for Foot Washing you had the options of going to the men’s area, the women’s area, or the mixed area. Our table decided together to go to the mixed area.

I knelt before an empty foot tub choking back my tears and washed the feet of a dear Sister from our table. Then she washed mine. You know using the large baby wipe cloths seemed perfectly normal. Not odd at all! Then I greeted each of my tablemates. I gave the dear young Sister a hug, and kissed her cheek. I thanked her for her voice at our table.

I’ve done a lot of “processing” since Conference. Re-lived my tearful Love Feast moments many times. Pictured in my mind those empty foot tubs. I’m not sure if we can hold the Brethren together as one Body. For many of us the issue of absolute trust in the authority of Scripture is a deal breaker. I grieve the thought of division. But I grieve this “stuck” place we are in too. I desire to see the Church I love thrive and win many, many lost souls for Jesus. I long for a Church that holds faithful to Scripture and listens to the Spirit led counsel of the Body without the open rebellion and complete disregard for Christ’s truth that we are seeing from some places today. I long for a unity in Jesus that allows us to love one another and yet hold each other accountable. I believe the world needs the unique voice of the Brethren today more than ever. I pray for us. I pray for the One who makes impossible things possible. I pray for the One who makes a way when there seems to be no way. I pray for us. I pray for me. I pray for you. If you were here, I’d kneel and wash your feet.

“You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather serve one another in love. ... If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other. So I say, live by the Spirit....” Galatians 5:13-16 NIV

Tears in an empty foot tub. Pastor Larry <><