

IN MEMORIAM ET IMITATIONEM\*

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Any sermon celebrating George MacRae's life among us, if faithful to his legacy, must attend to those ancient texts to which he himself devoted his enormous erudition and from which he preached with such conviction, grace, and power.

George was partial to the Fourth Gospel. He enjoyed uncovering for us its compositional stratigraphy, its flirtations with Gnosis, and its high-boundary sectarianism. It is the product of a long process of traditioning by those who felt that had been called out of the world and were the circle of the enlightened.

The Johannine text read earlier, John 13:12–20, encourages members of this sect to serve each other. Jesus himself washed the feet of his disciples and so must they, for “a servant is not greater than his lord, nor is an apostle greater than the one who sent him.” This aphorism emphasizes the subordination of the one sent to the sender. But the story ends with another aphorism saying precisely the opposite, namely, that the one sent must be regarded as equal to the sender: “One who receives anyone I send receives me, and one who receives me receives the one who sent me.” Why did the author place these two aphorisms side by side to tug against each other?

Perhaps the author was unaware of their antagonism. During high school I worked part-time in a lumber yard with an old aphorist. One day the two of us were planing boards on a power planer and I forced a board into it too quickly, jamming the machine and ruining the board. My friend removed his pipe sapientially and said, “Haste makes waste.” I slowed down and made sure the machine had plenty of time to build up speed. Instead, it kicked off automatically, thinking it was

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not being used and required us to reset the blades. My friend again removed his pipe and said, "A stitch in time saves nine."

I would like to think the author of the Fourth Gospel was more systematic than my old friend. I propose another explanation, one informed by the transmission history of the second aphorism.

The first text read to us today is Luke's version of the sending of the apostles from town to town without purse, bag, or even sandals. They were to rely entirely on the generosity of those who received their good news. Inasmuch as a parallel account appears in Matthew, it is clear that the story originally appeared in the sayings source Q. Therefore, in Q, Matthew, and Luke the sending of the apostles ends with the same aphorism we found ending the footwashing in John:

One who receives you receives me,  
and one who receives me  
receives the one who sent me.

We also find evidence of this aphorism in Paul, Mark, the *Didache*, and Ignatius, making it one of the most widely attested sayings of Jesus in early Christian literature.

Recent studies suggest the primary oral transmitters of the aphorism were itinerant missionaries, and that its performative function was to secure food and lodging. Itinerants arrived in town barefoot and denari-less, announced that those who received them received Jesus himself, and expected hospitality. In certain regions such evangelical begging continued well into the second century.

Not everyone was thrilled to have these vagabonds knocking on their doors insisting on being received as the Lord himself. This is clear from the *Didache*, a document of the late first century.

Now about the apostles and prophets: Act in line with the gospel precept. Welcome every apostle on arriving as if he were the Lord. But he must not stay beyond one day. In case of necessity, the next day too. If he stays three days, he is a false prophet.

I suggest that the author of the Fourth Gospel saw the dangers in the too simple equation between disciple and Lord expressed in our aphorism, and thus situated it not in the traditional context of the sending of the apostles but in the context of Jesus' washing their feet. The point of this story is not apostolic support but apostolic sacrifice, not apostolic privilege but apostolic obligation, not apostolic begging from the community but apostolic service to it. The antagonism between the two aphorisms means this: to be sure, the disciples might expect to be

received as the Lord, but as the Lord who washed the feet of others; a servant is not above his Lord.

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George MacRae's life in those communities of the "enlightened" known as the Divinity School faculty and the Society of Biblical Literature kept these two aphorisms in Johannine tension. On the one hand, he stood among his colleagues here and in the guild as a giant among giants, as the delineation of his accomplishments and honors in our order of worship attests. Few biblical scholars have been as highly esteemed by their peers. Among these honors was his appointment as the first Roman Catholic to have served the office of dean in a predominantly Protestant American theological school, a tribute to his unbending ecumenism.

On the other hand, he worked among colleagues as a servant. The Divinity School faculty recognized his sacrificial contributions as a committee member and administrator, often taking over difficult, unenviable tasks. Even though he suffered physically for more than a decade, he dispatched his duties faithfully, seldom letting on how painful it was for him at times even to sit.

For several years he served the Society of Biblical Literature as its Executive Secretary, a time-consuming, thankless post demanding countless public addresses and committee meetings, diplomacy, and mountains of correspondence.

The bulk of George's literary productivity hides inconspicuously behind the monuments of others. His own articles are often embedded in *Festschriften* for someone else. Scores of dictionary articles, book reviews, and abstracts bear only the initials G. W. M. Behind a legion of dissertations, commentaries, and journal articles lurks unrecognized his brilliant editing. In recent years George wrote dozens of prefaces and introductions to books of others, often of his former students. Though few know it, without his diplomacy the celebrated publication of the Gnostic library of Nag Hammadi would have been impossible. To his scholarly colleagues George was a servant.

Some black and feminist theologians rightly have taken issue with the notion of servanthood insofar as it has oppressed the powerless and maintained the status quo for those with wealth, position, or influence. But George's service was not weak-kneed, self-effacing passivity. He served out of strength, not weakness. He greeted sloth with contempt, inflexible policies with impatience, and the sloppy, half-baked idea with the dispassionate logic of the Jesuit he was. To be sure, he willingly

washed his colleagues' feet, but he made sure those feet never trampled him or others.

But most of us here today knew George not as a colleague but as a teacher. We can perhaps appreciate his role as a servant among other faculty, staff, and scholars, but the Johannine image of a footwisher among enlightened equals is not our image of him. For us his students, the use of the aphorism in Mark is more appropriate.

Mark 9 tells us that Jesus warned the disciples he must suffer, and that they could not understand. Then we find this:

He asked them, "What were you discussing on the way?" But they were silent; for on the way they had discussed with one another who was the greatest. And he sat down and called the twelve; and he said to them, "Any one who would be first, must be last of all and servant of all." And he took a child, and put him in the midst of them; and taking him in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but the one who sent me."

We his students remember George not as one who expected us to receive him but as one who received us. We admired his knowledge and wisdom, marveled at his industry, and sat spellbound in his lectures. I'm sure he knew this and savored it. But he did not manipulate our admiration, pull rank, or demand acclaim. In fact, it was not easy to throw a compliment at him; he dodged them so nimbly we were seldom sure we hit him with one.

This may explain why many of us feel we have so much business yet to take up with him: that thanks to give for pastoring us through a personal crisis; that awe to express for his scholarship and eloquence; that hug to share for his unswerving loyalty.

I too have unfinished business with George, which includes thanking him for memories of my first encounter with him—and my last.

As an entering doctoral student I was assigned George MacRae as my advisor. At our first visit we sat together in his office on either side of a large desk neatly arranged with piles of papers and books like a banquet spread out for hungry eyes. As we talked he asked if I had a focused interest in the discipline. I told him what it was. Then for the first time I saw that avuncular—better, paternal—smile that I since have learned should be translated: "That idea is truly stupid and I'll disabuse you of it in time, but for now I want you to know that in spite of your ignorance I see a flicker of potential." He did not suffer fools gladly—but at least he did smile at us.

The last time I saw George we met in my office, which until recently had been his own. He was extremely busy, working in the dean's office a few hours between lectures at a clergy conference. As we talked, taking care of business, my five-year-old son interrupted us and pulled me to the window to ask if whales were as big as the Jewett house we could see across the street. With characteristic grace, George stopped our conversation, gave Julian his full attention, and smiled knowingly as much as to say, "Like father, like son."

And he took a child, and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms he said to them, "whoever receives one such child in my name receives me."

The next morning, while doing what he did and loved so well—teaching the New Testament—George's magnificent heart failed him at last, and he left us.

I am a low church protestant, but George will always be Father MacRae to me—not just because he was a priest of the Roman Church, as significant as that is for appreciating him, but because he was indeed a father to so many of us. Of course, he had a special relationship to Catholic students, but Orthodox, Protestant, Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, and Jewish students too loved him and were loved by him. Repeatedly and painfully he denounced in class the apparent anti-semitism of those very texts from which in other respects he drew spiritual strength. Though male, he addressed seriously the pain of women excluded from ministry by dint of gender. Though white, he showed sensitivity to students of color. In his scholarship he defended theological orphans: Valentinians, Sethians, Manichaeans, and Mandaeans. George was and always shall be to us all Father MacRae. We miss him dearly. Only in the mercy of time will we be able to calculate the immensity of our common loss.

I thought it best to conclude with a passage written by Father MacRae himself, taken from his own exposition of Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet in John. He wrote this:

Jesus defines his authority as Lord and Master in terms of performing an act of service, even the service associated with the lowest household slave. And he commands his followers to copy his example. . . . [Authority] is to be exercised in service as Jesus served his disciples. Jesus' ultimate act of service was his death.

*In memoriam:* this is precisely how we remember Father MacRae in both life and death. *In imitationem:* this is precisely the claim of his life and death on us all. Amen.