

BAPTIST STANDARD – November 22, 2017

VOICES: FINDING WACO’S HIDDEN TREASURE: THE “DIVINE SERVANT”

On my way to work every morning, I pass by Max Greiner’s bronze rendering of Jesus washing Peter’s feet in front of the Texas Baptist Historical Collection building in Waco.



“The Divine Servant” sculpture by Max Greiner at the Texas Baptist Historical Collection in Waco, Texas. (Photo by Craig Nash)

The sculpture, titled “The Divine Servant,” was gifted to Texas Baptists by Dallas Baptist University in 1998 and made the move from Dallas when the collection moved to its new home early last year. It is located just across a side street from my office, and several times this week I have felt compelled to walk over and give it a look.

Nearing the end of a year that has been, by most reasonable standards, exhausting and weary for many of us, it has given me a much-needed opportunity to pull away and to clear my mind from the cloudiness of the news, family illness and the demands of work.

Away from the Silos

One of the most notable aspects of the sculpture has nothing to do with the work of art itself but with its location.

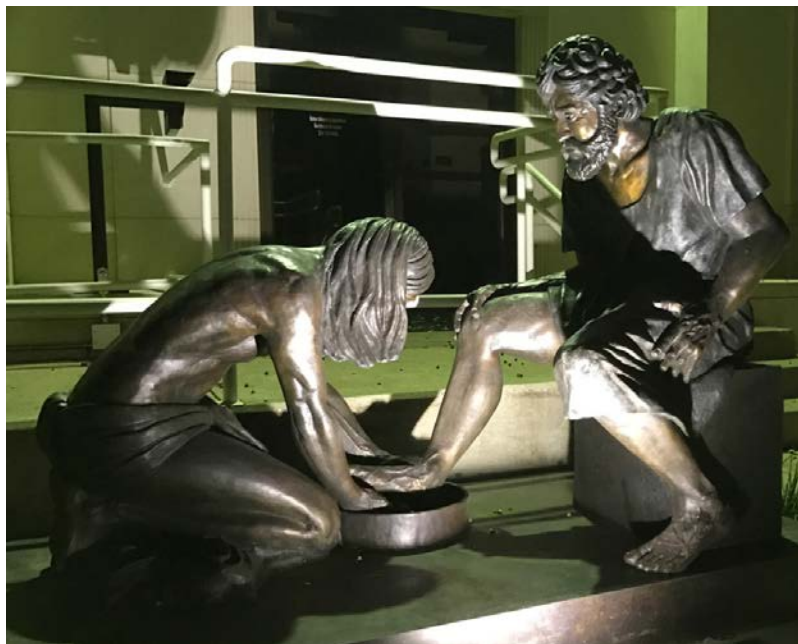
In case you haven't heard, Waco is booming, in no small part because of a beautiful couple with a funny and engaging TV show and a lifestyle brand that encourages us to create beautiful spaces to live and entertain in. This has attracted scores of visitors downtown every week to hang out around silos, eat from food trucks and purchase wares to take home.

In addition, new businesses are popping up every week in once-abandoned spaces, and folks are actually walking around downtown, looking up and around, taking selfies with the ALICO building in the background and asking locals where they should eat and what they should see.

The statue is near where all this is occurring, but a tourist would have to be lost, wandering around several blocks from the all the action in order to stumble upon it. Jesus performs his act of humility on the margins of the crowds, in the places where we aren't always looking for it.

Near to the homeless

Alan Lefever, the director of the Texas Baptist Historical Collection, tells me that he has seen some of downtown's homeless population stopping at the sculpture to talk to it. I imagine they see something in it that we are unable or unwilling to see.



“The Divine Servant” sculpture by Max Greiner at the Texas Baptist Historical Collection in Waco, Texas. (Photo: Alan Lefever / Texas Baptist Historical Collection)

I’m guessing more than a few of them have gotten down low to peer into the eyes of Jesus. As the sculpture is aligned, it is impossible to see the face of the Savior without doing so, and doing so requires a certain amount of humility — which is, of course, the point of the work and the story from which it is inspired, as well as the great Christ hymn from Philippians 2, which is inscribed on the side of the sculpture.

It’s a magnificently absurd story, isn’t it?

Away from the powerful

The creator of all there is stooping on the ground to wash his friend’s feet. Imagine someone from outer space (or the outer realms of our own world) who has never had any exposure to the Christian story but has some ideas about God and gods and worship and allegiance and power differentials.

If you asked them to guess who was God in this work of art, what do you think they would say? If they had recently heard sermons from certain television pastors or evangelical personalities who have aligned themselves with elected officials who promise victory and influence in the culture wars, it might be an easy answer: “Well, the guy getting his feet washed, of course!” There’s a spirit of triumphalism that has engulfed those who claim to speak for God that has clouded the picture of Jesus washing feet, so much so that the question may even be confusing for us sometimes.

Our God slays enemies and advances our social and political agendas, we reason. He doesn’t wash feet.

Near the heart of God

The American church is at a crossroads, and I believe the symbols we choose to embrace will give some indication as to who and what we will be in the coming years.

Some are declaring very loudly and confidently that they will embrace the sword and the bully pulpit, looking to powerful, wealthy men who promise to return them to a place of prominence they feel they have lost.

Others are, sadly, turning away from the body of Christ altogether, unable to stomach this anti-Christian triumphalism, too tired to look for other symbols that will guide them toward God. I pray we find the courage and humility to look to the Divine Servant, beckoning us to the side streets, away from the crowds and toward the ground where the hurting, hungry and homeless walk.

That’s where we find God.

Craig Nash grew up in Chandler, Texas, and is a graduate of East Texas Baptist University and Baylor's George W. Truett Theological Seminary. He has lived in Waco since 2000, where he works for Baylor and attends University Baptist Church. If he were any more Baptist, he would need a committee on committees to help him decide who will help him make major life decisions.