

Sermon, Maundy Thursday, April 18, 2019, Jane A. Beebe

“Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." John 13:5-7

Jesus asks the disciples—and us—directly: “Do you know what I have done to you?” And Jesus says, “For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.” Most of you are probably familiar with the hymn *Abide With Me*. The poem on which the hymn is based was written in 1847 by Henry Francis Lyte, a Scottish Anglican. The version in our hymnal does not include this stanza:

“Not a brief glance I beg, a passing word,
But as Thou dwell'st with Thy disciples, Lord,
Familiar, condescending, patient, free.
Come not to sojourn, but abide with me.”

Familiar, condescending, patient, free...

The word ‘condescending’ particularly leaps out at me. These days, if we say that someone is condescending, we probably think in pejorative terms: we think of someone who is patronizing. However, ‘condescend’ can be a lovely word.

According to the OED the literal meaning is “to come down.” The first meaning is, “To come down voluntarily.” The second meaning is, “To come or bend down, so far as a particular action is concerned, from one's position of dignity or pride; to stoop voluntarily and graciously...”

The disciples have been following Jesus, listening to Jesus, trying to imitate Jesus. They have been traveling together, from one town to another, and now they are in Jerusalem. We will hear soon what happens next, how Jesus goes into the garden to pray, knowing what is coming, hoping that his companions will stay awake, will actually be present with him in body, mind and spirit. But now, it is evening. It is time to gather, to rest, to break bread together. The entry into Jerusalem has been triumphant; crowds have gathered in the city. I am always moved by the detail that Jesus goes into the Temple to look around. It is the place where Jesus has offered much preaching and teaching; it is the place he calls “my Father’s house.” What is Jesus thinking? What is he imagining?

But now Jesus is among his friends and disciples—and this includes Judas, by the way. And this time, Jesus does not use many words. He demonstrates with his actions how the disciples are to care for one another, going forward. He shows us how *we* are to care for one another. His first action is so simple and yet so profound. He takes off his outer robe. He ties a towel around himself. He fills a basin with water. He washes the feet of his companions. Jesus is “familiar, condescending, patient, free.”

He is “familiar” in the deepest sense of the word. This is a family gathering, dysfunction and all. Caring for the feet of another person in a time when feet were the main mode of transportation was not simply kind, but necessary for the health

and wellbeing of the whole person. Sometimes after someone has been sick or suffered some other kind of setback, when we see the person again and they are well, we say, “I am so glad to see you are back on your feet.” Jesus does not shy away from a task usually performed by servants or slaves. In Jesus’ familiarity with us in our bodies, minds, and spirits in this act of foot-washing, Jesus is in a unique position to assure us that we are “entirely clean.”

Jesus “condescends” to us. Jesus came down from heaven and incarnated as a human being: mysteriously fully human, fully divine. But this condescension is about more than the Incarnation, beautiful and holy as it is. This seems to be the whole, confounding trajectory of Jesus’ life: to always go lower. He asks us, “Do you know what I have done for you?” And then invites us to do the same. We are asked to take off our outer robes, to be vulnerable, simple, honest. We are asked to tie a towel around our waists, to be of service, to make sure we can all stay on our feet. Going into a lower place, even with intention, can be a fearful thing. What will we encounter down among all those feet? I believe the Benedictines have it right in their Rule. Embracing the lowest place leads to freedom and peace. There is a spaciousness in this place. Jesus is to be found in this place.

And Jesus is surely patient. Time and again we hear how Jesus takes time to be human, to pay attention, even when pressed to go a different way, to respond to an immediate or seemingly competing concern. Jesus heals people, feeds people,

and even cries at all the wrong times and in all the wrong places. Even now, in Jerusalem, Jesus takes time to be with the disciples, to share a meal. I would like to imagine that, scared, nervous, and confused as they might have been, there was conversation, even laughter. Jesus goes from disciple to disciple, neglecting no one. We too, are invited to take our time, to be present, to be gentle. A little later in the Gospel of John, Jesus says, “I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends...” (John 15:15) On this journey downward, if we are all servants of one another, if we care for one another’s dignity as human beings, then we *are* Jesus’s friends. Therein lies our freedom.

A few years ago, while I was in seminary, I decided to volunteer with a homeless shelter located at the First Baptist Church in Amherst. It’s right on the edge of the UMass Amherst campus. One of the options was to help out in the kitchen during breakfast. I began going on Tuesday mornings before work. I mainly washed dishes—not my forte, I must admit—but it was something. I felt the need to do something concrete to balance all the reading and writing required by my classes. I began to notice some of the residents of the shelter about town on days I walked over to do an errand or get lunch. One day, I bent down to give a couple of dollars to someone I recognized sitting in a sheltered doorway. Unexpectedly the person took my hand for a moment. I was startled but not afraid.

I am not sure exactly what was exchanged in that moment. I was leaning over this person, perhaps in an attitude of unwitting condescension—and not in the best sense. What we became were two human beings briefly meeting on the same plane. I received something that day: recognition, blessing, presence—Jesus’ presence.

There is a song that has been going through my head in recent days:

Precious Lord, Take My Hand by the great gospel musician, Thomas A. Dorsey.

Precious Lord, take my hand.
Lead me on, let me stand.
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn.
Through the storm, through the night,
Lead me on to the light.
Take my hand, precious Lord,
Lead me on.

When my way grows drear,
Precious Lord, linger near,
When my life is almost gone.
Hear my cry, hear my call.
Hold my hand, lest I fall.
Take my hand, precious Lord,
Lead me on.

When the darkness appears,
And the night draws near,
And the day is past and gone.
At the river I stand,
Guide my feet, hold my hand.
Take my hand, precious Lord,
Lead me on.

