

“Learning Discipleship from the Disciples”

Jesus: The One We Follow

John 13:1-17

John Breon

The first time I was in this building, I noticed the paintings of Jesus and the apostles in Fellowship Hall. I’ve seen them in other churches. Kenneth Wyatt painted them and sold the prints to help raise funds for the Foundation for Evangelism, especially to help fund professors of evangelism at United Methodist Seminaries. I also remembered that one of my preaching heroes, Jim Buskirk, had preached a series using those paintings at Tulsa First UMC. I used to subscribe to his sermon tapes, so I dug through some boxes and found the cassettes of Buskirk’s sermon series called “Learning Discipleship from the Disciples.” I’ve borrowed my series title from him and I’ll use some of his insights, along with other research in these sermons.

We’re beginning with Jesus. That seems appropriate. The church always needs to begin with Jesus. But we start this series with Jesus because he is the disciple-maker, he’s the model for disciples, he’s the one we follow.

Kenneth Wyatt, the painter of this portrait, said that he knew he was inadequate as an artist, but he also knew that to complete this collection of portraits he needed to paint the Master of the Apostles. And, he wanted the setting to be a time when Jesus was with all of them. He quotes one of his professors who said, “If the cross were not the symbol of the Christian faith, then it would be the basin and the towel, representing the service that Christians must render to others.” Wyatt saw this painting as an opportunity to show Jesus in service to his apostles. He first depicted the water splashing wildly as Jesus poured it. Then he thought that it needed to be a more peaceful moment. So he shows the water gently filling the basin. He decided to show Jesus acting very deliberately and not looking up, because he knew that the disciples were watching him (*The Apostles* 59).

In John 13:15, Jesus says, “I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.” He had told them something similar earlier: “A

disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master. It is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master” (Matthew 10:24); “A disciple is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like the teacher” (Luke 6:40).

We’re looking at Jesus as the example, the pattern, for disciples. We’ll talk more about what a disciple is and what discipleship means. But for now, being a disciple basically means to be with Jesus, to follow Jesus, to become like Jesus. Again, Jesus is the one we follow. Let’s look at Jesus as our example. Then we’ll talk about how we follow today. How do we become like Jesus?

I frequently quote Michael Card. He’s a singer-song writer-teacher whose lyrics so often capture and convey the meaning of the Scriptures. He got his start in music as a college student. He was attending a church where one of his professors was preaching. Nearly every week the professor asked Michael to write a song about Sunday’s Scripture. He did this for some time, still intending to be a teacher until his friend Randy Skaggs needed a recording to show that he could produce an album. Randy wanted to record some of Michael’s music as a sample. When Randy submitted the recording, the record company said they would hire him as a producer if he would use Michael’s music for an album. Now Michael has been a recording artist for more than thirty years. He doesn’t just write Bible songs, but some of his best work includes songs that make the Bible come alive. Here’s one he wrote about this scene in John’s Gospel:

In an upstairs room
A parable is just about to come alive
And while they bicker about who’s best
With a painful glance, He’ll silently rise
Their Savior Servant must show them how
By the will of the water
And the tenderness of the towel

And the call is to community
The impoverished power that sets the soul free

In humility to take the vow
That day after day we must take up
The basin and the towel

In any ordinary place
On any ordinary day
The parable can live again
When one will kneel and one will yield
Our Savior Servant must show us how
By the will of the water
And the tenderness of the towel

And the space between ourselves sometimes
Is more than the distance between the stars
By the fragile bridge of the servant's bow
We take up the basin and the towel

And the call is to community
The impoverished power that sets the soul free
In humility to take the vow
That day after day we must take up
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(from *Poema*, 1994)

Jesus has loved his disciples and he shows his love for them right up to the very end.

It's interesting what the Gospel says Jesus knows here. Jesus knows who he is, he knows the power the Father has given him, he knows where he comes from and where he is going, he knows who is going to betray him. If some of us had that kind of knowledge we'd be asserting our authority and setting up our administration. That kind of knowledge can lead to arrogance and controlling others. But Jesus, having that knowledge, gets up from the table, takes off his robe, ties a towel around his waist, gets a basin of water, and washes the disciples' feet like a slave. For Jesus, that

knowledge leads to service. Knowing eternity, Jesus begins to serve here and now. The form of God was revealed in the form of a servant.

One aspect of the meaning of the foot-washing is that Jesus gives us an example of humility and service (vv. 14-16). In the upper room Jesus laid aside his robe and served as a slave. In coming to earth he laid aside the clothes of glory and put on our human nature in order to wash our feet. He lived a life of service, of giving himself away, of putting his life on the line. Because John mentions the Passover here, the Passover lamb and the cross are reflected in the foot washing. And Jesus says he is our example and he calls us to follow him.

How do we become disciples and start becoming like Jesus? We make a decision. We decide that this is what we intend to do. After forming that intention, we do all we can to learn about Jesus and to learn from Jesus. We open ourselves to the power of the Holy Spirit who works to form the character of Jesus in us.

Thomas à Kempis was a priest and leader of a religious community in the 1400s. His book, *The Imitation of Christ*, is one of the most-read Christian books in history. Early in that work he writes,

“Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness,” says the Lord. These are Christ’s own words by which He exhorts us to imitate His life and His ways, if we truly desire to be enlightened and free of all blindness of heart. Let it then be our main concern to meditate on the life of Jesus Christ. (Vintage Spiritual Classics, ed. 3)

Thomas goes on to say that we need the Spirit of Christ so we can understand the words of Christ. So we read and study and meditate on the Gospels. And we pray for the Holy Spirit to guide us and teach us and empower us to follow Jesus.

The kind of servanthood Jesus models is the foundation of the community that Jesus creates. We who follow him are called to do what our Master does. We are called to be slaves, to be a servant-church. God gives the Holy Spirit to enable and empower this kind of service. The Holy Spirit continues to create the community of Jesus’ followers who love and serve.

“Washing one another’s feet” becomes a symbol of any kind of humble service we give to someone. It’s great to give a few dollars to help people in Moore or anywhere else there has been a tragedy. It’s good to give to support all kinds of helping ministries. But the servanthood Jesus models is bigger and deeper than that. It means learning to see a person and getting to know that person. It means spending time investing ourselves in knowing someone, learning with them, and working with them to make a difference in both our lives.

Here are some examples of people following the example of Jesus in service.

- teachers at the elementary schools in Moore—calmly leading their students, comforting them, singing with them, praying with them, protecting them

- first responders and everyone who rushed in to help pull people out of rubble

- people who are working and will keep working at clean up and rebuilding

- Bishop Hayes literally washing the feet of those who were ordained on Wednesday. That’s an example and a symbol of leading by serving.

- Promising Tomorrows—transitional school for homeless kids in OKC—I visited there with a group last week—they serve children and their families—stress of being homeless affects brain development; having something positive to look forward to (hope) reverses that

Let’s bring it closer to home—Hope’s House in Caddo (Dewey take 3-4 minutes to tell about what’s happening)

Let’s bring it even closer to home. We are called and empowered to be servants like Jesus. We start serving at home. A man told his pastor that he was so thrilled that his wife had become a Christian. “I’m not complaining. It’s great that she’s involved in church and going to conferences and studying the Bible. I’m not complaining, but what about the laundry? It keeps piling up.” The pastor told the woman that he had a word from the Lord for her. She got out her notebook to write it down and asked, “What is it?” He said, “What about the laundry?” She said, “Who have you been listening to?” He said, “The Lord. But he spoke to me through

your husband" (Jim Buskirk, "Jesus: The Cross and the Towel" Tulsa FUMC, 3/11/90).

We can expand that to include husbands and children and all of us. What about the trash? What about the bills? What about courtesy? What about gratitude? What about however the Lord wants you to be a servant right now?