

March 13, 2022

Second Sunday in Lent

John 13:1-17

“Do As I Have Done”

1. The couple had finally returned home after a week in the hospital.
 - a. She still had a very long recovery ahead of her, the eight-inch incision across her belly was scarring nicely under the bandage still covering it.
 - b. The cancer they had found was pretty well contained (thank you Jesus!) but the chemo and radiation were still future torments she had to endure.
 - c. Her hair would be gone soon.
 - i. She was angry about that.
 - ii. She was angry about a lot of this.
 - iii. But she was motivated more by survival than by vanity, so the hair could go if only she could still be around to see her grandkids graduate years from now.
 - iv. The hair.
 1. Chop it off, she thought, defiant.
 2. Why not? it's gonna fall anyway.
 3. But honestly she wasn't ready.
 - d. She had had the hair conversation with her husband, who had been by her side through the whole hospitalization, unflappable, attentive, loving.
 - i. Today, as she talked about it, he wanted to say
 1. “You'll be beautiful without it, and you'll be beautiful when it comes back,” but he hesitated.
 2. Instead, for some reason, he blurted out: “Would you like me to wash your hair?”
 3. She gave him a side-eye look. “No, I can do it” she lied.
 4. She was exhausted.
 5. “Please, let me do this” he said now more fully aware of what he was asking.
 6. “Ok, fine” she relented.
 - ii. It was awkward and crammed in their small bathroom, with her seated on a tall stool by the sink, but they managed.
 1. As he lathered the shampoo on her head with his fingers, he told her he was having a flashback to that one year when the kids had gotten head lice at school.
 2. For some reason that was really funny and they laughed until they cried.
 3. And then they cried until they sighed a halting, cleansing kind of breath.
 4. With her hair rinsed and towel dried, they sat quietly in bed together, just holding hands.
 - e. It's not hard to imagine the emotional connection of that husband and wife as he washed her hair, a caring action born out of their many years of love and now their shared anxiety about the future.
 - f. Yet somehow in our gospel passage, we more easily miss the emotional content of Jesus washing the feet of the disciples.

- i. This Jesus, who alone knew he'd be dead in less than 24 hours,
 - ii. this Jesus who had taught and corrected and laughed with these followers,
 - iii. this Jesus spends the precious time he had left with them to offer them an object lesson, and show them love.
- 2. On Sundays this Lent we are focusing on the last week of Jesus, the week he was crucified, Holy Week, as we call it.
 - a. Today's gospel passage is an event which happened the day before the crucifixion, the very night Jesus is betrayed in the Garden of Gethsemane.
 - b. Looking back on that evening, the disciples could have thought: everything was different after that night
 - i. We look back on our lives that way sometimes.
 - ii. The night before an accident, or the days before COVID shut everything down
 - iii. A friend once told me, referring to a once-in-a-lifetime event, "you'll forever think of your life as in what happened before it, and after it."
 - iv. This passage has that quality of "before"
 - v. The disciples sat for dinner with their teacher. Totally normal.
 - vi. But Jesus knew it wasn't a normal meal.
 - vii. He knew Judas was going to set him up to be arrested that night
 - viii. And so Jesus gets up and does something unexpected
 - c. Jesus actions in this passage are disruptive, literally.
 - i. The washing of feet was an action solely reserved for the servants, the slaves even, to do for the guests coming to the home
 - ii. So, washing dirty feet wasn't an action for a leader or a teacher.
 - iii. Secondly, the washing of feet usually happened before people sat at table.
 - iv. It was a welcoming, hospitable thing which helped people feel ready for the meal
 - v. So, interrupting the meal would have been unusual, even rude
 - 1. But that is what Jesus does
 - 2. He interrupts the meal
 - 3. He interrupts their power structure by serving them in this most usual way and at a completely unexpected time.
 - 4. He interrupts the cycle of hate or of revenge: after all, Jesus washes the feet of Judas before Judas went out and betrayed Jesus!
 - d. As with other actions by Jesus, he is misunderstood, this time by Peter. Mind you, all the other disciples had already let Jesus wash their feet.
 - i. Peter doesn't want any part of this disruption.
 - ii. Peter is uncomfortable with the moment.
 - iii. I can't tell if it was the power reversal or the intimate gesture or maybe the embarrassment of the moment
 - iv. Jesus, always the teacher, offers a lesson with an edge:
 - 1. either you're in or you're out, Peter.
 - 2. OK, I'm in, said Peter (though we'll read about how much that would be true in next week's reading)

- v. When Jesus had finished disrupting their meal and washing their feet, he explained himself:
 - 1. “If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you... If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.”
 - 2. Blessed are the disrupters of convention for the sake of love
 - 3. Blessed are the humble who serve
 - 4. Blessed are the stubborn who refuse to hate
- 3. We are called by Jesus to follow his example of disruption, a disruption of human power dynamics and a disruption of the knee-jerk rhythms of life.
 - a. It’s quite in vogue to talk about disruption in the context of business these days. The Harvard Business Review summarizes the idea of a “small enterprise targeting overlooked customers with a novel but modest offering and gradually moving upmarket to challenge the industry leaders.” <https://hbr.org/2015/12/what-is-disruptive-innovation>
 - i. That disruption shakes things up, the little business grows, makes money, others try to copy, the end.
 - b. But the disruption Jesus offers challenges not an overlooked opportunity, but rather upends how the world works or should work
 - i. From a motivation of power and control, to a motivation of service and compassion
 - ii. From a motivation of hierarchy, to a motivation of a flat society
 - c. Our church is involved in the Matthew 25 initiative, whose goals are
 - i. Building congregational vitality
 - ii. Dismantling structural racism
 - iii. Eradicating systemic poverty
 - d. Those goals call for disruption, for humble service, for challenging “the way things are”
 - e. And this disruption isn’t about “giving up something” so others can have a little more freedom, income, etc., but it calls for the kind of sacrifice which Peter wasn’t willing to enter into:
 - i. To undercut his social ladder climbing ambitions
 - ii. And to open his heart to receiving love which he could not control.
 - f. This disruption calls for vulnerability which opens our hearts to serving, to righting wrongs, even to admitting we’ve benefitted from “the way things are” at the expense of the wellbeing of others.
 - g. This disruption is intimate, immediate, and emotional.
 - h. This disruption prepares us for the uncertainty of what comes after today, because we never really know what tomorrow will bring or not bring.
 - i. And so when Jesus says “do as I have done to you” he is challenging us to sacrifice our position for the sake of justice, and to offer compassion for the sake of community.
 - j. And to do it will bring blessing along with a disruptive change to the way things are.
- 4. If we’re serious about following Jesus, we’re going to have “Peter moments” when we’re going to think Jesus is asking too much of us. When we realize Jesus is already leading by example, maybe we’ll take a step towards loving with his disruptive and life-giving force.

Sources

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/jesus-washes-feet/commentary-on-john-131-17-3>

<https://hbr.org/2015/12/what-is-disruptive-innovation>

Questions for reflection

1. Share a story of an action in your life (with you acting or someone else acting) which changed the direction of your life.
2. Peter was really offended that Jesus was trying to wash his feet, even as Jesus was trying to teach him about service and compassion (John 13:1-17). What would be a contemporary example to help us better understand this biblical story?
3. What are disruptive actions we can take which would impact structural racism?
4. What are disruptive actions we can take which would impact systemic poverty?