

Practicing To Become

Exodus 12:1-4, (5-10), 11-14

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Psalm 116:1, 10-17

Tonight is not about what we believe. It's about what we *practice*—because what we practice is what we become.

Every Biblical text tonight speaks of ritual shaping identity. In the book of Exodus, Moses tells the Hebrews to eat this Passover meal in *this special way* because in so doing, *they would become a people who remember deliverance*. In Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians, he says, "Do this in remembrance" so that *you will become the body of Christ*. In the book of Psalms, David says, "Lift the cup", so *you become a people of gratitude and testimony*. And in the gospel of John, we hear Jesus tell his disciples to wash one another's feet so they would *become a community shaped by upended love*. These are not merely symbols to study. These are practices designed for the purpose of shaping us into something particular; for shaping us to be God's people.

We like to think we are shaped by our beliefs, and that is true to a degree. But most of what forms us... is repetition. Our dietary choices, our physical activity, when and what we put on our TVs, with whom and when we socialize, how we care for our homes, bodies, property, and relationships. All of what we do shapes who we become. Our habits are all liturgies. And we are always becoming. We are either becoming more of who we want to be or something else altogether.

Tonight, Jesus gives us a particular set of practices designed to form us from the outside in. Jesus is not just *teaching* humility. He is reforming human understanding around the purpose of our relationships. In Jesus' kingdom, power flows downward and lifts those at the bottom. Jesus does not disregard hierarchy. He owns his role as their teacher and Lord. He professes that servants are not greater than their masters. Instead, he indicates

that those in positions of power must use their authority to elevate others by behaving themselves as servants.

We should not imagine from today's story that the disciples just forgot about their feet needing to be washed. The liturgy of all people at the time was to have their feet washed upon entering a home. They would have removed their sandals at the threshold. There would have been a basin with water right there. No, they didn't forget. To avoid putting anyone in the position of having to lower himself to such a degree, their failure to act as soon as they came in was essentially an unspoken agreement among the disciples to avoid the problem by ignoring it.

When Jesus disruptively got up in the middle of the meal, removed his nice outer layer, tied a towel around himself, and knelt down to wash his students' grimy feet, he was making a clear statement about **his** priorities. He was not interested in upholding his own dignity or his protected status of rank among them. Instead, he was freely offering them the honor of being the one served by his own hands. Maintaining social codes of hierarchy has always been the way status is preserved. When Peter refused to let Jesus wash him, he was essentially trying to shield Jesus' dignity. All the while Jesus was intentionally working to upend the status those social codes protected. Jesus gave his honor away freely. He knelt down before those whom his position entitled him to dominate. And he did not say, "admire my servanthood." He said, "repeat this."

In some African traditions, they practice the principle of *ubuntu*. Ubuntu means, "I am because we are." In contrast to the Western individualistic way of understanding oneself in differentiation from others, ubuntu sees personhood as relational. A story often told to underscore this philosophy is when a researcher visited a rural village in southern African. She placed a basket of fruit a distance away from a group of children, telling them to race, and whoever ran to the basket first could have the fruit. The children proceeded to hold hands and run together towards the basket. The researcher asked why they did that and

the children responded, “how can one of us be happy if the others are sad?” Through ubuntu, these children understood their interconnection and the value of their dependence on one another for identity and purpose. “I am because we are.”

Jesus goes even further, basically saying that, “You are who you become through one another.” So, if we kneel before one another, we become a people who refuse to dominate one another.

Our world’s system operates based on rank, self-protection, and transactional relationships. If we fail to follow Jesus’ teaching, we will default to the world’s way of operating...because *those liturgies are everywhere*. If we desire to follow Jesus, we must be intentional about the behaviors we choose because they will shape who we become...both individually and corporately.

In the Bible, remembrance doesn’t mean *thinking back*. It means be re-aware, to re-enter the experiences of the past and be shaped again by what those experiences originally taught. Through the Passover, *we become the freed people*. Through the Eucharist, *we become Christ’s body*. And through foot washing, *we become a community of servants who co-create God’s Kingdom*.

Tonight, we will wash. Tonight, we will eat. Tonight, we will remember. And if we keep doing these things...

May we become the kind of people for whom love looks like kneeling.