

The Practice of Carrying Water: Physical Labor

Genesis 2:1-7, 18-25

John 13:1-5, 12-17

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Genesis 2:1-7, 18-25

In the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, ⁵when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; ⁶but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground—⁷then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. ...

¹⁸Then the LORD God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.’ ¹⁹So out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. ²⁰The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. ²¹So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. ²²And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. ²³Then the man said,

‘This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
this one shall be called Woman,
for out of Man this one was taken.’

²⁴Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. ²⁵And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.

John 13:1-5, 12-17

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. ²The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper ³Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, ⁴got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. ⁵Then 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. ...

¹² After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, ‘Do you know what I have done to you? ¹³ You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. ¹⁴ So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. ¹⁵ For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. ¹⁶ Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. ¹⁷ If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.’

Introduction

Last time I preached, it was right after the killing of two African-American men and followed by the shooting of police in Dallas, which I addressed in my sermon. Since then – in just two weeks - we’ve experienced the attacks in Nice and Baghdad, the Baton Rouge police shootings, the Munich killings and now in Kabul. And now we stand between the Republican and Democratic conventions. Today, instead of addressing these horrific events, I want to take a step back to help us be grounded spiritually. Because only when we are grounded in the secure presence of God, grounded in the wisdom of Christ, can we be of use to God, in the world that God so loves.

Barbara Brown Taylor tells about the time that an ice storm swept through their rural community, knocking down trees and cutting off power for days. Of course, she “knew” that she and her husband, and their horses and chickens for that matter, were dependent on power for their daily routine. Of course she “knew” they depended on power for their water pump, power for their heating, power for their refrigerator, power for their lights. But suddenly, with one big storm, they were propelled into a pre-electric universe. Chopping wood to keep the fire lit 24/7 ... hauling water and clearing ice for their animals ...and everywhere she turned, “the darkness exposed [her] helplessness.” But by day three, she says,

“I decided that a power outage would make a great spiritual practice. Never mind giving up meat or booze for Lent. For a taste of real self-

denial, just turn off the power for a while and see if phrases such as ‘the power of God’ and ‘the light of Christ’ sound any different to you.”ⁱ

Later she confesses,

“I do not wish for ice storms, either for myself or for anyone else. Yet I stay grateful for what this particular ice storm required of me. Having no power, I discovered how much I could actually do. I was made to exceed my self-interest for a while, expanding my circle of concern to include every living thing in my vicinity. I was deprived of my usual defenses against cold, darkness, and hardship, giving me a better sense of how most people live. I was forced to engage the brute requirements of staying alive on frozen earth, leading me to fresh appreciation of a body that works.

“Long after the thaw, I stayed tuned to the grace of physical labor. Bending and rising to hang laundry on the line, kneeling to scrub the yellow pollen off the back porch, hauling bales of fragrant hay up to the steps to the loft, raking the chicken pens and gathering the eggs: this work gives me life.”ⁱⁱ

I agree – not that we should welcome power outages or storms, as the thunder and lightning and torrent of rain last night reminded me! No, I agree that physical labor can be a kind of grace. Physical labor can be work that gives us life. Physical labor can be a spiritual practice.

Now I admit that for some of us, physical labor as spiritual practice doesn’t make any sense whatsoever. If that’s true for you, you’re in good company. From the time of the earliest Christians, there’ve been some who have split off the physical from the spiritual. There’s a name for that viewpoint – it’s called “dualism” or “Gnosticism” – a view that says spiritual is good, and physical is bad. At its extreme, Gnosticism says our bodies are evil, and should be punished for their propensity to sin. But a more common Gnostic dualism still influences many Christians: the view that says our souls are the “real deal,” and our bodies are distractions, “less than” our minds or

hearts. And physical labor – laundry, cleaning, schlepping, mowing – physical labor is dismissed as annoying, an unwelcome to-do list to get through so we can get back to the “true” work of the spirit, like prayer or meditation, Bible study or walking by the lake.

Honestly, I don’t know any *secular* society that at some level doesn’t support that dualistic view, at least when it comes to physical labor. Even in cultures that glorify athletic prowess – just think how far back the Olympics go! – we feel differently about manual *labor*. Our inclination is to measure our success by how far we rise above work that is menial and dirty. Street-sweeping, garbage-collecting, toilet-cleaning, grass-cutting, dish-washing, snow-removing shelf-stocking labor ... those are about as far down on the “totem pole” as you can get in the hierarchy of jobs. And don’t get me wrong: I don’t want to romanticize that kind of work! It’s *hard*, and for most people on this earth, dirty work is not a spiritual practice they dabble in. It’s an exhausting, never-ending requirement of daily life.

But when we rank our physical labor below our spiritual aspirations, our physical selves as “less than” our spiritual selves? Well, from the time of the earliest Christians, that view has been labeled a *heresy*.

It’s no accident that the Bible opens with the reminder that we humans did not fall as spirits the sky in a blaze of pure light! Scripture tells us that we’re made of *dirt*, scooped up, shaped by God’s hands, and for whatever reason, God chose to breathe his own breath into us. Our *spiritual*-self came after our *dust-of-the-earth*-self - and both are crucial to who we are.

Spirit *and* body – prayer *and* labor – that’s our nature, and we forget it at our peril. That same point is made, loud and clear, in the gospels. Scholars have long believed that the gospel of John is especially geared to refute that separation between physical and spiritual. It’s in the gospel of John, after all, that we hear this message: “The Word *became flesh* and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.” And it’s in the gospel of John that we discover Jesus kneeling down at his disciples’ feet to wash them.

Now, I just want to say a word about Jesus washing their feet. I confess that I'd always pictured that in the sort of Maundy-Thursday-service-antiseptic-people's-feet-are-clean-but-we-wash-them-again sort of way. Then, a few years ago, I went with Dave Tolmie to Tanzania to visit our mission partner. The Faraja School, established with the help of Dave's own parents, is a remarkable place, a residential school for handicapped children who would otherwise be swept aside and forgotten. The joy these students, their resilience and grace, moved me deeply. It was eye-opening in many ways – an amazing example of the difference we can make in the world. But visiting Faraja *also* opened my eyes to the real truth of this Scripture passage! Walking around on the dry, dirt roads of Faraja, where the dust coats your feet and legs all the way up to your knees – for the first time I understood what it must have been like when Jesus stooped to wash his disciples' feet. This wasn't a pious exercise in humility! No, this was filthy, dirty work, washing off the dust of the earth, cleansing the layers of grime from their ankles, soothing the weary soles of their feet as tenderly and deliberately as Jesus soothed the weary souls of their spirits.

And then he did one more thing: he invited them to wash each other's feet too. "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. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them." If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

I don't think it's an accident that our word "humility" comes from the word "humus" – dirt. We are blessed if we humble ourselves as Jesus did, for in humility we find our true selves again. In humility, we remember we are made from the dirt, and to dirt we shall return. In humility, we remember that there's nothing humiliating about caring for each other; in fact, caring for each other is joyful. In humility, we remember that Jesus came to cleanse us and make us whole again, and we're invited to help put the world in order too.

In the midst of the chaos of the world, Jesus invites us to join him in the physical labor of making order out of chaos ... in the physical labor of cleaning up the mess of human life ... in the physical labor of caring for one another. For in that labor, we are blessed.

So what might the practice of physical labor look like for us? I've asked around, and since I promised confidentiality, I've changed the names to protect the innocent!

“Debbie” says that she finally got her otherwise-extraordinarily-organized husband to help her clean out the garage, which in her words was beginning to border on hoarding. He was so surprised at the amount of stuff they cleared out! But what surprised both of them even more was the sweetness of the partnership in doing this unwelcome job together. The laughter over junk they had saved ... the memories that emerged with items uncovered ... the accomplishment of conquering a mess ... the physical stretch of pushing themselves past exhaustion. It was, in its own way, like climbing Mt. Everest. And she feels blessed.

For “Joe,” who is a live-in caregiver to his elderly, dementia-laden wife, he swears he feels like it's his calling. He doesn't mind what I would call the “icky” parts of his job; it's just part of the act of love. His goal, he says, is to provide companionship and dignity for as long as he has her in his life. And even though his wife has no idea what a toll it takes on Joe, it doesn't matter to him. He admits that it can get to him, but has maintained his sense of humor, somehow, through it all. And he feels blessed.

As for me? Weeding and dishes are my spiritual practices. It hasn't always been that way. I loathed them for years, since that was the “girls' job” when I was growing up. The boys, my older brothers, could do cool things like running the lawn mower or later driving around to run errands. But Karen and I – we little sisters – we got to help Mom do laundry, and in the summer, we alone were responsible for weeding. I hated it.

But somewhere along the line ... well, things changed. I'm not saying it's romantic, or glorifying, or fancy. It's just that now, well, now both weeding and laundry, along with cooking and washing dishes – I enjoy them. They bring order out of chaos. They allow me to tend to my family. They remind me that I'm not just my brain, where I live much of the time, or my heart, which breaks all too often for you. simple chores remind me that I am my hands as well, and my elbow grease, and my sweat and blood and tears. And weeding especially - maybe it's after all those years of standing at gravesides, praying, “from dust we are made, and to dust we shall return” – all those years of weeping with those who are burying their loved ones, all those years of knowing that all lives end ... for me, it is especially in the act of weeding, of digging my hands in the dirt, that I am humbled. These chores remind me that I am fully human ... that I will one day die, that to dust I shall return ... but that for now, I am fully alive. And I am blessed.

What is it for you? Maybe you can name it in a heartbeat. Maybe you don't know yet. But I invite you to observe: observe the physical labor of yourself or of others, the physical labor that becomes transformed into a spiritual practice. The sacred labor of caretaking, of wiping up after a furry animal or broken human. The sacred labor of bringing order out of chaos, of tidying garages or pulling weeds. The sacred labor of providing nourishment or warmth, of hauling water or chopping wood so that another living creature is well-tended. The sacred labor of washing dirt away, and remembering, with deepest thanks, the dirt – the ordinary, sacred dirt from which we come.

ⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World* (NY: HarperCollins, 2009), pp. 144-5.

ⁱⁱ P. 146.