

Lenten Discipline

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One discipline I have found extremely helpful in week-after-week preaching, is the discipline of the lectionary. However, it has become important to me occasionally to exercise my "freedom" and to depart from the usual discipline, and to preach a "series" which may not be prescribed in the lectionary. The series on "Discipline" is a departure from the lectionary discipline.

I have been asked by the editors to write briefly about the rationale for doing this particular series, and to include one sermon extracted from the series. One practical reason for doing series preaching at all is that I have found that congregations seem to like it. Not as a steady diet, but an occasional series seems to prick interest as it gives them something they can sink their theological teeth into a little more deeply. Consequently, attendance seems to be better at worship during a series. Perhaps it is the "Dallas syndrome," as nobody wants to miss an episode. However, there are more important reasons for choosing "Discipline" as the theme for the Lenten series. It is, first of all, that Lent is historically a time when the church has stressed the importance of the disciplines of the faith. Secondly, if we take seriously what the sociologists are saying about contemporary society, we are experiencing as a nation, a retreat from a sense of serious responsibility for anyone except the self. Labels as "the me generation," and "the age of narcissism," join with popular book titles such as *Winning Through Intimidation* to provide clues to the character of the present culture. To whatever extent the sociologists are right—and my own experience suggests they are on target—then we are indeed experiencing a spiritual crisis to which the gospel speaks a corrective word.

Two books in particular provided the background for the series. The first is Christopher Lash's searing critique of the seventies, *The Culture of Narcissism*. One quote will suggest his theme:

After the political turmoil of the sixties, Americans have retreated to purely personal preoccupations. Having no hope of improving their lives in any of the ways that matter, people have convinced themselves that what matters is psychic self-improvement: getting in touch with their feelings, eating health food, taking lessons in ballet or belly-dancing, immersing themselves in the wisdom of the East, jogging, learning how to "relate," overcoming the "fear of pleasure." Harmless in themselves, these pursuits, elevated to a program and wrapped in the rhetoric of authenticity and awareness, signify a retreat from politics and a repudiation of the recent past. Indeed Americans seem to wish to forget not only the sixties, the riots, the new left, the disruptions on college campuses, Vietnam, Watergate, and the Nixon presidency, but their entire collective past, even in the antiseptic form in which it was celebrated during the

Bicentennial. . . . To live for the moment is the prevailing passion—to live for yourself, not for your predecessors or posterity.

The second book is Robert Bellah's popular *Habits of the Heart* which renders a similar judgment upon the eighties as Lash's book upon the seventies. Bellah, updating Alexis de Tocqueville's hundred-year-old study of American mores, is afraid that the individualism which has always marched through American history, may have indeed become "cancerous." And so the series of sermons is an attempt to offer a scriptural "radiation treatment" to this growing tumor of individualism that has invaded the American body. The titles for the five sermons are:

The Discipline of Worship
The Discipline of Solitude, Meditation and Prayer
The Discipline of Simplicity
The Discipline of Service
The Discipline of Submission

The Discipline of Service

John 13:4-17

When I was a child, and every summer, the family would make its annual pilgrimage back to the maternal homeplace—to the little community known as Crooked Creek, eight miles outside Eatonton, Georgia. The highlight of the week was the annual church barbecue at the Crooked Creek Primitive Baptist Church. I confess I did not care for the preaching all that much. It was too loud for my taste, but mostly it seemed as if it would never end. Even when one preacher finished and you thought you were free, there seemed always a fresh one on the bench ready to take his place. But what made it worth all the pain was lunch: barbecue that had been cooking all night, Brunswick stew, fresh farm vegetables, pies and cakes and not a Betty Crocker mix in the bunch. No Eatonton cook would dare bring a Betty Crocker cake to the Crooked Creek barbecue. The other impression that has lingered from my childhood memories of those hot summer days of all-day preaching and dinner on the grounds, is when it came to the time in church when all non-members were asked to leave. That meant my family and me, because my family had long since moved to the city and become Presbyterians. It always happened just before lunch, when we were asked to leave. The preacher was polite enough, and everybody seemed to understand. Nonetheless, we were firmly invited to leave the sanctuary. It was because, I was told, they were going to wash feet. Only the members could take part in the foot washing, and the whole tone in the telling of it led me to believe that foot washing was a very serious and special thing to do. I remember wanting to stay and see, even resenting a bit being asked to leave just as something interesting was about to happen, because I simply could not understand why anyone would wash somebody else's feet. Even after hearing it read in the Bible of how Jesus washed the feet of the disciples, I still did not understand why anybody would want to

keep doing such a silly and distasteful thing. But the one thing I did understand was that for those who did it, it was not a silly or distasteful thing. For those who did it, I came clearly to understand (though not understanding at all) . . . I clearly understood that something mysterious, strange and foreign to my ten-year-old mind, something powerful and important was taking place behind the closed doors of the Primitive Baptist Church. Moreover, I learned early not to laugh.

Now, with many years of experience behind me, including a lengthy stint in a theological seminary, I am even more convinced that something of powerful significance was occurring behind those closed church doors. I no more understand fully now than I understood fully then. Only, now it is not so much what I do not understand that bothers me. It is more the part that I do understand that bothers me; and I suspect that is the way it was for the Twelve, too—gathered there that night in the upper room—ready for a good meal and a hearty glass of wine. After all, apostles, too, needed a little time out. Only, Jesus turned serious on them.

Most all the commentaries suggest that the disciples did not understand. I wonder. I know, of course, Jesus caught them off guard. If anything, they were expecting a pre-victory celebration. After all, Palm Sunday was only a week away. The parade route was planned. The details were in place. It was to be the inauguration of the new kingdom, and they were on the inside. No way they could lose, so why not celebrate? Only, Jesus turned serious. Jesus took a towel, and a basin of water, knelt down before the first as if to wash his feet, like a common servant. "Perhaps he is clowning . . . the boss playing the servant . . . good joke Jesus." The tone, however, did not lend itself to laughter. Jesus was serious. And when he finished he asked them, "Do you understand what I have done to you?" You call me Master and Lord, and rightly so, for I am. But if I then am Master and Lord, and I have washed your feet, then you should wash each other's feet. I have given you an example so that you can copy, because I tell you very solemnly, no servant is greater than the master." And then he adds this sentence: "Now that you know this truth . . . do it . . . for it is the way to happiness." You think the disciples could not understand that? I think they knew, just as I think we know. The words are not that difficult. "I have given you an example. If I wash your feet, you are to wash one another's feet. The servant is not greater than the master. This is the truth which is the key to happiness." No, it is not the part we do not understand, I think. It is the part we do understand that causes the problem.

The discipline of service has traditionally been one of the classical spiritual disciplines, which the church has valued across the centuries, not only for the sake of those being served, but also in the mind of the church, because of what the discipline of service does for the one doing the serving. Very early in the life of the church, Bernard of Clairvaux wrote, "Learn the lesson that, if you are to do the work of the prophet, what you need is not a scepter, but a hoe." And at another time, again very early on, when the church was struggling with the theological fad of the day which was to reject the world and run off to the desert to live a life of a hermit, in meditation and prayer (as proof of one's spirituality) and St. Basil was arguing against the ascetic life style, "If you

always live alone," he asked "whose feet will you wash?" as if any life lived alone (either in geographic isolation, or psychological isolation, or theological isolation) is authentic. "If you live a life apart, whose feet will you wash?"

Only, the discipline of service, for those who are eager to probe deeper, is not so much a matter of service projects, as it is a set of the psyche. In Richard Foster's words, "Service is not a list of things we do, though in it we discover things to do. It is not a code of ethics, but a way of living." It is the difference between learning the rules to the game of basketball and playing the game of basketball. Look sometime at Dominique Wilkins, or Spud Webb. Every movement reflects a style that is instinctively basketball, without ever giving it a thought. Basketball has become so much a part of their lives, it just comes naturally now. So it is with the discipline of service. No one ever has to stop and contemplate what service project shall I concentrate on this month. One simply does, in the living out of one's days . . . one does, without ever giving it a thought, one serves.

Now, the reason getting to that point is so difficult a discipline for most of us, is because it runs so counter to the current prevailing cultural mentality, which is to be served . . . to win. Unless I miss my guess, the current prevailing attitude of the culture at large is not to serve, but to win. Of course, if serving can serve to help one along the way to win in the long run, then sign me up . . . but the prevailing mental attitude is to come out on top.

Consider the myths that reveal so much about who we are. Our mythical heroes are almost inevitably about people who are poor but who become rich, or who are nobodies who become famous, or those who are weak and become strong. Who over forty can ever forget the ninety-eight-pound weakling on the beach who loses the girl to the big bully who kicks sand in his face? The weakling then takes the Mr. Atlas Physical Fitness course, returns in six weeks to chase away the bully, and in the last frame wins the girl. Corny as it sounds, that little cartoon pretty well captures the mood of the majority mindset, which is that "Wimps never win." Where, for example, are the mythological heroes who, patterned after the Franciscan or Buddhist ideal of the rich voluntarily become poor, or in the tradition of Christ who found victory through surrender? Remember those baffling words of Jesus, "My power is made perfect in weakness," or better perhaps as the Jerusalem Bible says it, "My power is at its best in weakness." Can you imagine any sentence Jesus spoke more subversive to the prevailing spirit in the country today than "My power is at its best in weakness"?

I bought a book in preparation for this sermon. I frankly was a bit embarrassed to ask for it over the counter. It seemed too obscene. I had hoped to find it on the shelf myself so that I wouldn't have to ask, but I couldn't. The book is entitled *Winning Through Intimidation*. The dust jacket says it is the most talked about book of the seventies. The thesis is predictably that life is a battleground, where in order to win, one must employ every technique including intimidation . . . because "if you don't beat them, they will surely beat you, and what counts in this life is winning." So, more bombs than the Russians . . . more business than the Japanese . . . more tourist attractions than Pittsburgh . . . more sales than Fred . . . more friends than Mary . . . more alimony . . .

larger settlement . . . more money . . . more church members, maybe . . . and one might win; to which Jesus would say "Win what?" After you have used all the techniques, superior strength, intelligence, trickery and intimidation . . . what have you won? Where is the profit if one wins the whole world and loses one's soul?

Notice closely, the scenario. Jesus on his knees, kneeling before his friends. He has washed their feet, he is drying his hands, he says "I have given you an example." Notice the turn Jesus' words take: "If you do as I have shown you . . . you will be happy." No talk of duty here. No talk of responsibility for the poor, or compassion for the weak. It is there, of course, and Jesus would speak of it at other times. Only, here, with time running out, the object of the conversation turns to the disciples themselves, to their wholeness and their happiness. It is almost as if Jesus speaks to the disciples in exasperation, "Look Peter . . . and you James . . . and John . . . Thomas . . . if you insist on talking in terms of winning, I will tell you one more time. It is like I said back there at the beginning . . . in that first sermon . . . on the Mount. Happy are not those who make war . . . happy are the peacemakers. It is not the haughty and the high-handed who are happy . . . happy are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Those who win happiness are not those who intimidate. Happy are those who show mercy. They are the ones who shall obtain mercy. You want happiness . . . wash somebody's feet . . . and you will find the happiness you are seeking."

Well, there is no sign they understood or bought into all he was saying that night, any more than you and I grasp it all or buy it all. Again, it is not a matter of misunderstanding the words, is it? It is not the part we do not understand. The part we do understand is enough to consume us for quite a while. What we do understand is that Jesus, in rejecting the traditional symbols of greatness, takes a towel, and thereby redefines greatness. They should have learned by now. Goodness knows, he had said it often enough. "The last shall be first, the first last . . . those who find life shall lose it, and those who lose life, for my sake, shall find it." It was Jesus' principle of the great reversal. But they were slow to learn. What we do understand is that in this reversal of values, the discipline of service is not as it would seem: voluntary slavery, but freedom. A mindset that thinks of serving is no longer captive to that mentality that needs always to be served, or always to win. A mindset of service sets one free from having always to control.

The discipline of service does not mean that one must be a doormat. Sometimes, the best service one can perform for others is to refuse to do anything in order that they do for themselves. That takes discretion, of course, but that, too, is part of the discipline of service. Not to tie a six-year-old's shoestrings can be a harder discipline, but a greater service, than tying it. The discipline of service is a set of the mind, or perhaps better, a set of the heart which puts the well-being of the other first.

Neither does the discipline of service imply that there are no leaders, or authorities or power brokers. The Bible is not that naive. No, it is that Jesus gave leadership a new definition: the true leader is one who serves, and that is a reversal. The symbol of the true leader, to the disciples' chagrin to be sure,

was a towel.

I have been much impressed by the initial efforts of the new institute established at Emory University, sponsored jointly by the Candler School of Theology and the Emory Business School. It is named "The Institute for Servant Leadership," and is headed by Episcopal Bishop Bennett Sims. Bishop Sims defines Servant Leadership as "relational intensive management," which means, I take it, that personal relationships, human relationships, are factored into the management philosophy of the business enterprise in a major way. The concept will, if effective, do much to recapture the traditional Biblical concept of work, which historically has always been "to serve." The words of the Episcopal Prayer Book affirm, "So guide us, O God, in the work we do that we do it not for self alone, but for the common good."

In *Habits of the Heart*, Robert Bellah's current book on how contemporary Americans see ourselves (in home—at church—at the work place), Bellah documents how, in a hundred years, we have moved as a culture from a commonly held concern for the common good to a preoccupation with private greed. He cites television, not necessarily as the villain, but as the mirror of this contemporary mood. "With few exceptions," he says, "prime time gives us people preoccupied with personal ambition. If not utterly consumed by ambition and the fear of ending up as losers, these characters take both the ambition and fear for granted. If not surrounded by middle-class arrays of consumer goods, they themselves are glamorous incarnations of desire. The happiness they long for is private, not public. They make few demands on society as a whole. . . . Personal ambition and consumerism are the driving forces of their lives. The sumptuous and brightly lit settings of most (TV) series amount to advertisements for a consumption-centered vision of the good life, and this doesn't even take into consideration the incessant commercials, which convey the idea that human aspiration for liberty, pleasure, accomplishment, and status can be fulfilled in the realm of consumption. The relentless background hum of prime time is the packaged good life," says the sociologist.

Bellah goes on in the thesis of the book to plead for a return both in the private and public realm . . . for a return to a servant mentality. Listen to what he suggests such a return would mean for business management:

Reasserting the idea that incorporation is a concession of public authority to a private group *in return* for service to the public good, with effective public accountability, would change what is now called the social responsibility of the corporation from its present status, where it is often a kind of public relations whipped cream decorating the corporate pudding, to a constitutive structural element in the corporation itself. This, in turn, would involve a fundamental alteration in the role and training of the manager. Management would become a profession in the older sense of the word, involving not merely standards of technical competence but standards of public obligation that could at moments of conflict override obligations to the corporate employer.

Such a concept, says Bellah, would require a deep change in the ethos of schools of business administration, where business ethics would have to be-

come central in the process of professional formation; of course the same thing could be said of government, labor, and the church as well.

“I have given you an example,” said Jesus. “If I wash your feet, you ought to wash one another’s feet.” Only, please note, the discipline of service is not given as an order. This is not a directive. It might have been, except for the last sentence: “If you know these things, happy are you if you do them.” In the reverse logic of the kingdom, Jesus gives the formula for the good life. Now, I do not pretend to understand it all. Sometimes it makes no sense at all . . . sheer idiocy. The part I do understand, and understand deeply, is that something eternally serious and ultimately powerful was happening behind those closed doors—while the rest of us outside waited impatiently in line to be served our barbecue.