

Knowing and Not Knowing

John 13:1-17

Last Sunday was the first Sunday of Lent, this season where we anticipate and remember and prepare for Holy Week, Good Friday, and Easter. As we continue through this season we are using the worship resources from Leader Magazine where the passages are from the Gospel of John and the events of Holy Week, that last week of Jesus' life before his crucifixion. And the theme chosen by the Writing Team for this year is "**Dwelling in Dissonance.**" This idea of not moving too quickly to resolution but allowing ourselves to sit in dissonance or tension or discomfort and to reflect and learn from it.

I appreciated the Writing Team's introduction to this theme so I want to read a longer portion of it here. They introduce this series and theme by saying:

Ours is a world of urgency, a digital age of immediate gratification. We rush to resolution. We binge watch. We speed to shave minutes off the GPS's ETA. We retreat into silos of sameness and scapegoat those who disagree with us. We skip from Palm Sunday to Easter. Our temptation to seek relief from the dissonant uncertainty of life's liminalities might be heightened this year. This is, after all, a historical moment when many of us feel caught up in forces beyond our control, such as the culture wars, military conflict, political polarization, power grabs, forced deportations, funding cuts, climate crises, ecological devastation, nuclear proliferation, and economic hardship.

As Pierre Teilhard de Chardin writes in the prayer 'Patient Trust:' "We are quite naturally impatient in everything to reach the end without delay. We should like to skip the intermediate stages. We are impatient of being on the way to something unknown, something new. And yet it is the law of all progress that it is made by passing through some stages of instability—and that it may take a very long time."

We encounter the 2026 Narrative Lectionary readings for Lent in this context: a slow, intentional journey through the second half of the gospel of John...we will spend the rest of Lent exploring John's Holy Week narratives. Most years, the season of Lent is meant to prepare us for Holy Week. This year, the entire season of Lent is framed by the experience of Holy Week, inviting us to linger in the intensity of the final week of Jesus' life, to dwell in the dissonance...

As you explore each week's Narrative Lectionary text, we invite you and your congregants to ask, "What is the dissonance in this passage?" In music, dissonance occurs when two or more notes strike the listener as discordant. Our ear instinctively *knows* the note that will bring resolution and *wants* the dissonance to resolve to something more harmonious. Similarly, we might be tempted to rush through the discord within these Lenten texts, anticipating the already-and-not-yet resolution of Easter. Can we receive the gift of the dissonance: the sense of both/and in all this season's stories and in our world, the knowing and not knowing, the tension between how things are and how one wants things to be? Can we pause on the threshold between loss and glory? Can we lament in the liminality, accept ambiguity, and lean into longing as we sense God at work

(and sometimes not visibly at work) in these passages and in our world? Ultimately, can we stay in the hard places with Jesus and linger throughout Lent at the edge of our understanding, so we might more fully remain open and present to the hard places and the mysteries we face today?"

So as we reflect on the passages from John over the next few weeks we'll try to draw attention to some of the dissonance, the tension, the discomfort, and the questions we may feel or that the characters in the stories may have felt.

John 13:1-17

For today, we'll reflect on John 13:1-17 which we heard read. The story of Jesus washing his disciples feet as he prepared for what was to come in his crucifixion. And in this passage, we can see a tension or dissonance between Jesus' knowing and the disciples', in particular Peter's, not-knowing.

We're told:

- **"Jesus knew that his time had come to leave this world and go to the Father."**
- **"Jesus knew the Father had given everything into his hands and that he had come from God and was returning to God."**
- **"He knew who would betray him."**

Jesus is presented as full of knowledge. He knows who he is, where he came from, and where he is going. He knows the hearts of the disciples and knows he will be betrayed.

In contrast, we see Peter and the disciples revealing their lack of knowledge and understanding.

- Peter doesn't understand what Jesus is doing when he comes to wash his feet. At first he refuses, then when Jesus says he must, Peter wants not just his feet but his hands and head washed too. The impression I get is he just didn't quite understand what Jesus was doing.
- Jesus also says to the disciples **"You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand."** (13:7).

There is a contrast here between Jesus and Peter and the disciples. Fuller knowledge and understanding contrasted with a lack of understanding.

For people who are familiar with biblical stories, like the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, it can be hard to not skip ahead, hard to not look at earlier parts of the story from a later perspective. What I mean here is it can be difficult for us, at times, to not look at pre-crucifixion and resurrection stories of Jesus from a post-resurrection perspective. To gloss over the tension and discomfort and conclude, "well, we know it all works out in the end with the resurrection." And with our later and fuller perspective it can be hard also to not look at stories like this where we see Peter lacking understanding and think, 'well, how can he not understand what Jesus was doing?'

Peter's Story

It is difficult but helpful to try as best as we can to put ourselves in the shoes of the characters, and in this case, Peter, to help ourselves understand the story. So I want to trace Peter's story a little bit.

We don't know a lot about Peter's pre-disciple life but in Acts 4 he is described as "**unschooled and ordinary.**" (4:13). And we know he was a fisherman, as that is how Jesus found him when he called Peter to follow.

What we can know of the life of a fisherman in that time and place is that he was likely a very hard worker as fishing was labor-intensive with long hours, he likely lived at a subsistence level (enough to get by but by no means well-off), he was considered working-class.

So let's assume Peter is a regular, working-class, living paycheck to paycheck, nominally educated, ordinary man. And while he's going about his daily routine as a fisherman, this person walks by and says "**Come, follow me,...and I will send you out to fish for people.**" (Mk. 1:17). And he does. We don't know how much he knew of Jesus at this point but my guess is not much, since Jesus is just starting his public ministry. So that is a radical step to drop everything and follow. I wonder what went through Peter's mind, what motivated him to do this. I imagine some dissonance here as Peter didn't know much, but was intrigued enough to follow.

From here, Peter journeys with Jesus for a few years, walking with him each day, hanging out with him, talking with him. Over these years Peter witnesses and joins in incredible things like:

- Jesus associating with sinners and outcasts.
- Jesus confronting the religious leaders and customs and pushing against dominant ideas and theologies.
- Listening as Jesus taught in parables, then explained things to the disciples afterwards.
- Miracles including healings, calming the storm, raising a girl from the dead, etc.
- Large crowds following and listening to Jesus
- Being sent out by Jesus to minister and preach apart from him.

It was an intensive internship, a drastic learning curve I imagine. And Peter, at times, and the other disciples (I am focusing on Peter but he's not alone), struggled to understand what was going on, they missed the point at times.

- When Jesus warns the disciples about the yeast of the Pharisees and Herod, Peter and the disciples conclude that Jesus must be talking about how they forgot to bring bread along on the boat. (Mk. 8:14ff). They missed the point.
- When Peter is brought along to witness Jesus' transfiguration and Moses and Elijah are said to have appeared. Peter suggests they build shelters for the 3 of them and then the author tells us "**He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.**" (Mk. 9:6). He didn't quite understand. We often see Peter being the one who speaks up. I get the impression he was somewhat impulsive and didn't think twice before speaking up and putting himself out there.

- When Jesus tries explaining, for a second time, that he is going to be crucified, we're told that the disciples "**did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.**" (Mk. 9:32).

Again and again we see Peter and the others struggle to understand what they part of. But then there were also moments of enlightenment. When Jesus asks the disciples who he is, it is Peter that says, "**You are the Messiah.**" A moment of insight and understanding...immediately followed by more ignorance as Jesus attempts to explain that he'll be crucified and Peter "**took him aside and began to rebuke him.**" And then Jesus confronts and rebukes Peter (Mk. 8:31-33).

And as Jesus' crucifixion draws closer, something Jesus had repeatedly told the disciples would happen but they struggled to wrap their heads around it...as this time drew closer, Jesus told Peter that he would deny Jesus publicly. Peter insists this will never happen. Even if everyone else does, he would never. But in the garden as Jesus is being arrested, Peter takes his sword and cuts off the ear of one of the officers and later flees along with everyone else, deserting Jesus. And as Jesus undergoes his trial, Peter denies knowing Jesus 3 times, just as Jesus predicted, causing Peter to break down and weep. (Mk. 14).

3 days later, when Peter receives word that Jesus' tomb is empty he runs there, sees it empty and we're told "**he went away, wondering to himself what had happened.**" (Lk. 24:12).

We can go on and see in Acts, Peter taking up a leadership role in the early church and so on but I draw attention to this story of Peter to highlight that faith was a long and winding journey for Peter and the disciples. There were moments of enlightenment and many, many moments of confusion and lack of understanding.

"Lord to whom shall we go?"

But one of my favorite passages of Scripture includes Peter and comes from John 6. Jesus had just spoken about himself as being the Bread of Life. It was a teaching that caused division and arguments among those that witnessed it. And then we read: "**From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. 'You do not want to leave too, do you?' Jesus asked the Twelve.**" And Peter, as per usual, is the one to speak up and he says, "**Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God.**"

I love that answer. If I put my own spin on it I see the dissonance, I see Peter effectively saying, "Look, there is a lot I don't understand here...but I know there is something unique going on with you, Jesus. There is much I don't know, but I know enough to know I need to keep walking with you."

I see myself in this answer. Especially in this season of Lent as we look toward Good Friday and Easter. As we reflect on the stories of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. As I've spent time reading the rest of the New Testament (and church teachings since that time) and what it says about the meaning of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. I find myself thinking, "God, there is a lot here that I just don't fully understand! I have a lot of questions! And I realize I may

never fully understand and I may never have completely satisfactory answers to all my questions. And I'm ok with that. Because at the same time I know there is something here, something to you, Jesus. So I know enough to know I want to keep walking the journey. Like Peter said, where else would I go?"

As we spend time this season reflecting on Jesus' last week, his trial, crucifixion, burial and resurrection, know that it is ok to not fully understand everything that is happening here. It is ok to have questions and doubts. The journey of faith is not a linear thing. Like Peter and the other disciples, our journeys will be full of twists and turns and questions and doubts and moments of enlightenment and moments of bewilderment. *And it all belongs*. It is all part of walking this journey.

Again I want to turn to the Writing Team in the Leader magazine that says about this passage in John 13, **"Do we know what Jesus has done for us? Maybe, somewhat. Probably not entirely. What might our not-knowing have to teach us? (If Socrates was right, perhaps the beginning of true wisdom is knowing we know nothing!) Still, we know enough to know that what Jesus offers in John 13:1-17 is radically loving. And perhaps that is enough to begin to do likewise"**

We will have questions, we will have doubts, we will have times of confusion, we will be confronted with mystery, there will be dissonance and tension and discomfort. And yet we can know enough to know there is good fruit from the Christ. We can know enough to follow their example walking in the way of peace. As Jesus says in this passages, **"I have given you an example: Just as I have done, you also must do."**

I will leave us with words from a poem from the Leader worship resource writing team:

"You remind us

that we don't have to understand everything
right now.

You invite us

To simply take off our sandals
And experience your love.

Scandalous as it is."