

## **“Where Does the Spirit Lead Us?”**

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Texts: Matthew 23: 1-12 and John 13: 1-15

The Spirit leads us downward. (Opening from Brian McLaren, *We Make the Road by Walking, Chapter 46*)

That may come as a surprise to people who are raised in a culture that is obsessed with upward mobility. We climb social ladders. We rise to a higher standard of living. We reach for higher position. We want to be on top. Some use drugs so that whatever their actual circumstances, they will at least feel high. Even our religious communities have an “up, up and away” mentality – flying away to heaven, leaving this old Earth below and behind.

But the Spirit leads us downward. To the bottom, to the place of humility, to the position and posture of service...that’s where the Spirit, like water, flows.

As Christians, this should be no surprise, and yet, we struggle all the time with upward mobility, self-advancement, financial security, and independence versus servanthood, sharing of resources, communal care, and community engagement. We marvel at the story of Jesus washing the disciples’ feet, but we

can't quite bring ourselves to either have our feet washed, or to wash the feet of another. We want badly to be more Christ like, more humble, more compassionate, well...in a word...more loving. And yet, the words we speak with our mouths, and maybe even the goals we set in our minds are offset by actions that are counter to what we say we're about. Christian churches everywhere talk about care for the least, the last, the lost, and the broken, only to shy away from such people and restrict services of the church to "members only". There couldn't be much more counter to the Bible than the privileges of membership. And yet, it's true in almost every church in America and maybe the world.

Even communion is closed in many congregations. Only the saved, confirmed, right answer-bearing people are admitted. Some churches only allow communion for those who belong to THAT church. At the same time, we preach a Gospel that tells the story of Jesus including Peter the denier and Judas the traitor at the first communion. Ministering in his name, how can we close the table to anyone when Christ himself didn't? Why is a seat at this table (referring to the communion table) for the privileged only? In some churches, you must understand communion to receive it. Well, frankly, I don't understand it and neither did the disciples. Yes, I can tell you the facts of how the first Communion

happened according to Scripture, but to understand why Jesus did much of what Jesus did is often beyond me.

That's because Jesus is ALWAYS counter-cultural. I can't think of an exception, except maybe the wedding feast at Cana. Brian McLaren writes, "Before Jesus, and even after him, most people assumed that God was at a great distance above us. To approach God meant to leave this world. But Jesus modeled a profoundly different vision. God comes down. God meets us where we are, in our neighborhood, on our level, where we need God the most. God descends to the pit of need, suffering, and abandonment. God is not distant from us, aloof, across a chasm, far above looking down. No, God is with us. Here. Now. In reach.

What do you suppose that means for those of us who call ourselves the people of God?

"If you listen to the Spirit," says McLaren, "here is what will happen to you." He goes through several servant-style activities that will leave you with something to *do*. You'll be led to the person who is all alone at a party and will make connections and welcome him/her/them. You know, that could even happen in church as well? You'll be in a position of power (which many of you are

here and, in our community,) and you could use that power for those who aren't at the table of privilege and belonging. I don't know about you, but that sounds tough to me. Sometimes I can barely take care of myself, let alone look out for someone else. So maybe someone will have to look out for me while I look out for someone else? Maybe I can receive as well as give?

Peter struggled with this, too. "You can't wash my feet!" he exclaimed. After some discussion, he wanted everything washed. In both cases, he missed the point. And I wonder if we do as well? Pretty easy to look at the faults of a guy like Peter (or Judas for that matter) and not realize that we often do the VERY SAME THINGS, whether intentional or not. This is tough work, but I'm afraid it gets even harder...

"Here's what will happen to you if you listen to the Spirit. You will realize that someone is angry at you or resentful toward you. You will hear that someone has spread false information about you or worked behind your back to do you harm. Everything in you will want you to write them off or to get them back. But the Spirit will draw you toward them in humility." Maybe people won't even be deliberately hurting you, or making your life difficult, but you feel they are doing it. Talking to a third person without talking to the person with whom

you are estranged is not only unhelpful, but also downright destructive. But oh, so tempting. Last week, while I was away, I had probably 3 or 4 conversations with various people in my life who sought my advice. To all of them the question, or advice, was the same, "Have you talked to them?" In every case, the answer was no. Human community cannot and will not survive unless those who oppose one another, or even those that are just leery of one another, don't start having conversation.

I was in a retreat last weekend, and without divulging too much information, let's just say that two people in my small group could not have been any more different. One a rural, traditional, heterosexual, white, male who had some firm opinions about various people, especially gay people. The other, a city-dwelling, homosexual, white, male who spent much time grieving over the loss of the love of his life. By time our day...yes one day...was over, the two men were having a conversation that was so deep they almost missed the closing ceremonies. The first man said to the second one, "I had some pretty firm ideas before I came here, but you have changed me. I'm glad I came here even though I had to be talked into it." Here's the deal: we can praise God that the two men, by a random act, were put into the same small group. But we also must admit that both men took a huge risk and brought all of who they were to the

conversation. They may not be lifelong friends, but I'm telling you that face-to-face conversation almost always works for the better. It's so much harder to hate someone with whom you have shared an intimate setting like a small group or a meal. And yet, our society finds new and better ways to stay apart from one another and hurl judgements in all directions thinking we're doing some good.

McLaren (and I think Jesus) advises us to approach someone who is angry or resentful towards us and say something like, "I feel there may be some tension or distance between us. I want to close the gap and be sure things between us are good. Your opponent may be too angry or insecure to respond well, but whatever happens, know this: The Spirit is at work within you.

McLaren goes through several more examples of "Here's what will happen if you listen to the Spirit". But every time, the Spirit leads us to places uncomfortable to do things we would otherwise not do, like washing feet, or including the doubter, the traitor, and the denier at our tables of communion (among others).

As we celebrate Independence weekend, I wish we'd spend some time taking a break from our renditions of "God Bless America" to instead ask ourselves, "how can we bless America...or at least our little corner of it...or...." To

think any of us are independent is untrue. Inter-dependent, yes, but none of us got where we are completely on our own. And no one else will either. Where does the Spirit lead us? To service, to fellowship, to grace and to love.

The Spirit of God is downward. Downward in humility. Downward in service. Downward in solidarity. Downward in risk and grace. You used to strive to be cool, but the Spirit makes you warm. You used to strive to climb over others, but the Spirit leads you to wash their feet. You used to strive to fit in among the inner circle, but the Spirit dares you to be different on behalf of the outcasts and outsiders. You won't find God at the top of the ladder. No, you find God through descent. There is a trapdoor at the bottom, and when you fall through it, you fall into God (McLaren).

It happened to Jesus. It will happen to you, too, if you follow the Spirit's lead.

Amen and amen.