

Zen and the Art of Bathroom Cleaning
Rev. James Van Schaick
Pound Ridge Community Church
Fifth Sunday in Lent
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John 20:20-33

Among the responsibilities of new parents is to pick up after the kids, try to keep them close to clean and presentable, and clean up their messes. While this is probably the least gratifying of the duties of parenthood, it is unavoidable, as anyone who's ever tried to get a 2-year-old to pick up his or her toys can attest. But things have to change, eventually – that is, if our children are going to have any hope of growing into self-sufficient adults.

Gillian and I have worked hard for years to get our children to take a bigger role in maintaining the condition of the household. The mission continues. It is much easier said than done. Doing things for the common good doesn't seem to be a tendency that is in our DNA.

Sometimes it gets pretty humorous. For example, Gillian or I will be balancing two basketsful of laundry on our way through the kitchen where dinner is on the stove, tripping over the vacuum cleaner where we've left it when we had to stop to walk the dog. Asking one of the kids to set the table, we'll inevitably hear, "Why do I have to do everything around here?" Some days you just take pleasure in small victories, like the kids leaving their wet towels on the floor, instead of on their beds. There are occasional bright spots. I will admit that I take some perverse enjoyment in seeing the kids searching frantically for something that I've put back in their closet, where they'd never think of looking for it.

Many of you know that I have three sons who are now in their "forties." They had their own standard comeback when asked to do something. It was, "What am I, a servant?" I guess somehow it was a dirty word to them: *servant*. Who wants to be a servant? One of my early bosses at Price Waterhouse used to say, "The problem with this operation is that there are too many generals and not enough privates." And looking around I realized that he was usually right. But it's just human nature. Who wants to follow, when they can lead? What are we, servants?

There used to be a time when there was a certain amount of "dues paying" that went on when you were new in a job. My first year at Price Waterhouse I spent so much time copying documents that there was no duplicating machine made that I couldn't operate like a pro. I joked that if I got fired, at least I had the skills to land a job in an office somewhere. Nowadays, I think young people enter the job market with different expectations. There's not much of a sense of appreciation

for “learning the ropes” by willingly doing the jobs that nobody else wants to do. Who wants to be a private, when you can be a general?

Of course, there’s more at work here. It’s not just that we don’t want to do the “grunt work,” at home or at work. If we have to do it, we need to make sure that we’re not doing more than our share. Being somebody’s servant means giving up power and control, something that is hard for us. We’re not about playing second fiddle here in America. We don’t give ticker-tape parades for bronze medals here. We want to see winners and be winners. We’ll be calling the shots, thank you, and nobody had better try to take advantage of us.

One of the problems that has plagued America for years has been what to do about illegal immigration. It is a complicated problem. One aspect of the argument I’ve never really grasped is when people say that illegal immigrants did jobs that no American would do. It just seems strange to me that in a country where at any point in time 5 to 10 million Americans are out of work, there could be jobs that went undone because nobody would do them. But perhaps our history of prosperity and the American culture of consumerism have set our sights so high that it’s true. There are jobs Americans will not do – plenty of them. Nobody wants to be a servant here.

Then there’s Jesus. Today’s gospel lesson from John begins with some Greeks who are visiting Jerusalem during the feast of the Passover. They announce to Phillip, “We want to see Jesus!” When he is told of this, Jesus gives us a rather perplexing response. He tells his disciples, “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.” (John 12:24-26)

So, John doesn’t tell us whether the Greeks ever got to see Jesus. We can imagine that they might have even been a little frustrated with Jesus’ answer that doesn’t seem to answer. What does all this talk about dying to ourselves and serving have to do with how we might get an appointment to see Jesus? But maybe what Jesus is telling us is exactly where and how to see Him. We find him in the life of discipleship and self-emptying sacrifice.

In the gospels, Jesus repeatedly makes statements about he came to serve, up to and including giving his life. But Jesus says it most forcefully today in John’s gospel. Other gospel writers talk about the anguish of Jesus, and his human hope that he might be freed from what he knows is to come. Luke tells us that Jesus said in Gethsemane, “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.” (Luke 22:42) But in John’s account Jesus has no second thoughts. In today’s reading Jesus says, “Now my heart is troubled, and what

shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour." (John 12:27)

John's Jesus has no doubt about what servanthood means, or what he was there to do. Jesus was there to do the job nobody else wanted to do. He paid the price of our sins for us. He gave himself up, made himself vulnerable, and humbled himself to accept the fate of the cross. Why would someone with the very power of God at his disposal do that? He did it to show us the way forward. He did it to show us that our conceptions of power were all wrong. If we would become great, we do it by becoming servants.

My oldest son, David, retired a few years ago from the Air Force as a tech sergeant. I remember several years ago when Gillian and I traveled to Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio to attend his graduation from basic training. We showed up there expecting to find my son. But we were instead greeted by a slender, ram-rod straight young man who answered "yes, sir," and "no, sir," held open doors, pulled out chairs, and saluted everything that moved. David had done very well in basic training, but I will always remember one thing in particular. When telling me about his achievements in basic, he seemed particularly proud when he said this: "And nobody in my wing can clean the bathrooms as well as I can!"

It's funny, but of all the things he had done, and excelled at, in his basic training, I think that pleased me the most. I told him so. But of course, I couldn't resist sharing my recollection of how doing something like that around our house would have been unthinkable for him and his brothers. But he continued earnestly, "No, I mean it. I really like cleaning the bathrooms. It's so Zen." Now "Zen" is a term that you don't hear much any more. It was in use a lot in the '70s. It comes out of Buddhist practice and what it refers to is a kind of self insight – a discovery about our inner natures. Zen is a wisdom that can only come to us through experience.

And what I heard David saying was that he was realizing that there was something deeper and more profound here than the need to have a clean bathroom. There's a kind of spiritual clarity that comes from losing oneself in a job that is humbling and unpleasant and doing it well for its own sake.

The servanthood to which Jesus calls us involves things we hear about every week – things like love, and forgiveness, compassion, humility, and selfless giving. And there is a certain Zen to them. They yield a wisdom that can only be had by experience. If we want to see these things as burdens, then burdens they will be. But we can choose to see them as the blessings God intended them to be. They can weigh us down, or they can build us up. They can foster perspectives and attitudes that are sustaining, enriching, and meaningful.

Do you want to see Jesus? Perhaps there's no better place to go for guidance than to the late Mother Theresa, who said, "Let us touch the dying, the poor, the

lonely and the unwanted according to the graces we have received and let us not be ashamed or slow to do the humble work.” Because when we are doing what Christ did – the jobs that nobody else wants to do – when we are loving the unloved and unlovable, touching the untouchable, helping those in need, and giving generously out of what God has given us, without worrying about how much anyone else in the house may be doing, we will see Jesus. We will see Him in the face of every one of our brothers and sisters whom we serve.

And you know what else? When we are on our knees with our brushes and disinfectant, up to our elbows in the needs of the world, that is when we are at our very best, both as people, and as a church. And it is then, too, that the world will see Jesus. They will see Him in us.