

Improv, foot washing, and practicing love

“You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.”

There is an organization in Austin that takes advantage of two of our city’s unique assets: our relatively large number of professional musicians and also our relatively large number of people who want to be professional musicians. Anthropos Arts matches professional musicians with low-income band students for instrument lessons and opportunities to perform in public. It is a genius idea that yields amazing results - because if you are learning to play a musical instrument, having a good teacher who believes in you is important.

And just as important is practicing. You know the old joke: How do you get to Carnegie Hall? Practice, practice, practice. So these pairs of adult mentors and students practice regularly - scales and technique and songs. And one of the distinctive things about their program is that they also practice improvisation.

Now, it might seem counter-intuitive to practice improv. When you improvise you are creating something on the spot, out of the blue and you will never do that particular thing again. You might think, there is no way to practice that, but there is. You learn to improvise by doing it. And every time you do it, you get better at it.

That sounds like some kind of crazy, circular logic, but it’s true. You do need to know the basics of how to play your instrument, what musical notes are, and all that. But the only way to really learn to produce a unique musical expression with no notice is to do it. And that is what these students do. They practice and know their instruments - and when they perform in public they

know that their director might point at them in the middle of a piece and they will be expected to improvise. And in fact each of them performs at least one solo improvisation in public each year. They never know when it will happen.

There's something compelling and beautiful that happens when musicians improvise. They get out of their heads and into the music. The rest of the band and the audience root for them. It turns out the beauty of improvising - in music or acting or even in ministry - is that it requires you to be connected to those around you. You have to listen because what you do is connected to what came before and what comes after. Improvisation is all about what you DO, not what you KNOW. And at the same time, when you do it, you will understand what you are doing better.

I've seen this happen with the students in that program. Knowing their own part is not enough. They want to know what all the other kids on stage will play because they might be called upon to take that tune to the next level with a riff that they cannot anticipate. All their preparation individually and as a group prepares them to create something novel at the drop of a hat.

I think being a disciple of Jesus is a lot like this kind of musical improvisation, and it is the way Jesus models for us what a life following him is like. Certainly no one expected him to get up in the middle of dinner and start washing their feet. But that is what he did, at the drop of a hat, out of the blue. And he told them,

“You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.”

Surely there are lots of times in the Gospels that the ones closest to Jesus, the ones who know him best, don't understand what he is teaching or what is going on right in front of them. Why does he flip tables in the Temple court? Why does he talk to that

Samaritan woman by the well? What did he mean when he said all those things about being bread, a shepherd, a gate, or a vine?

Jesus confronts their lack of understanding on a daily basis, yet instead of getting frustrated he improvises a way to show them who he is and show them how to follow him. He does it by getting on his knees and washing their feet. Then he tells them to do for each other what he has done for them.

There is no other way to understand what it is to be a follower of Jesus that to do this. Just like there is no other way to learn a musical instrument other than to play it.

He washes their feet. He tells them to wash one another's feet. He commands them to love one another. To wash another's feet - indeed to let Jesus or one of his followers wash your feet - is an act of love. It is humble, tender, and vulnerable.

There is a lot that is symbolic in this foot washing. In this act, Jesus is acting out being a servant to his disciples - which is why Peter objects so vehemently - so the foot washing is a visible way to enact that servant leadership. And Jesus washes their FEET, which can mean all kinds of things. In those days, when everyone walked everywhere in sandals, feet were dirty, calloused, and hard working every day. To clean another's feet was the lowliest task and for the Lord to do it reversed all the expected roles of a Messiah.

And Jesus tells us that this reversal is how people will know we are his followers. He wants us to believe, certainly, but our belief is not how the world will know us.

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We might or might not “get” why he washed the disciples’ feet or told them to wash each others’ feet. It’s possible that we don’t understand why we are about to wash each others’ feet here tonight. That’s okay.

The world will know us by how we love one another. And we will show our love for one another in ways large and small that are like washing each others’ feet.

The love we show by washing each others’ feet is sort of like practicing for musical improvisation. We need to know the basics of how to play our instruments, as it were, our scripture and tradition. We should spend time in worship and fellowship with other believers.

And we should practice improvising acts of selfless love for one another. Because at any moment Jesus, our band director, might point at any one of us and say,

“You! It’s your turn to improvise! It’s your turn to create an act of humble service at an unexpected place and time!”

To be ready for that time, we practice. We practice by washing each others feet so that we know what it feels like to be tender and caring for another and what it feels like to let them take care of us. We practice so we know what it takes for us to be vulnerable and reveal our calloused, ticklish feet that have carried us through this day, this week, this Lent, this lifetime.

None of us is born knowing how to love this way, we learn it. We learn it from Jesus and we learn it from each other. We practice loving each other as much as we can. At an unexpected time in an expected place you will have the chance to show that love in an unexpected way. At the time, you may not understand why, but it’s okay to understand later. For now, the most important thing is to love others as Jesus loved us. Amen.