
"Embracing the Darkness that is Already Known"

A sermon by the Reverend Canon Beth Knowlton
Maundy Thursday
John 13:1-17, 31b-35

"There was once a prince, and he wanted a princess, but then she must be a real Princess. He traveled right around the world to find one, but there was always something wrong. There were plenty of princesses, but whether they were real princesses he had great difficulty in discovering; there was always something which was not quite right about them. So at last he had come home again, and he was very sad because he wanted a real princess so badly."

"One evening there was a terrible storm; it thundered and lightened and the rain poured down in torrents; indeed it was a fearful night."

"In the middle of the storm somebody knocked at the town gate, and the old King himself sent to open it."

"It was a princess who stood outside, but she was in a terrible state from the rain and the storm. The water streamed out of her hair and her clothes; it ran in at the top of her shoes and out at the heel, but she said that she was a real princess."

"'Well we shall soon see if that is true,' thought the old Queen, but she said nothing. She went into the bedroom, took all the bed clothes off and laid a pea on the bedstead: then she took twenty mattresses and piled them on top of the pea, and then twenty feather beds on top of the mattresses. This was where the princess was to sleep that night. In the morning they asked her how she slept."

"'Oh terribly bad!' said the princess. 'I have hardly closed my eyes the whole night! Heaven knows what was in the bed. I seemed to be lying upon some hard thing, and my whole body is black and blue this morning. It is terrible!'"

"They saw at once that she must be a real princess when she had felt the pea through twenty mattresses and twenty feather beds. Nobody but a real princess could have such a delicate skin."

"So the prince took her to be his wife, for now he was sure that he had found a real princess, and the pea was put into the Museum, where it may still be seen if no one has stolen it."

"Now this is a true story."

I have heard this fairy tale by Hans Christian Andersen many times. But I don't think I have ever noticed that last line. This is probably because I detest this story. Not for the reasons you might imagine. Few of us would suggest this is a good life creed for men seeking wives or women seeking husbands. But that is not why I hate it. I hate it because it is a true story.

For whatever reason, early on, this story was often used as an explanation in my childhood for my "unfortunate" level of sensitivity. If I was complaining about some hurt or outrage, I would be met with a knowing look. My mother would gaze at whatever other adult was present to my tantrum and say, "Well, you know Beth has always been like the princess and the pea. If there was a pea under a hundred mattresses, she would feel it."

It was enraging.

The gift of our family and friends is they often know us better than we know ourselves. The burden of our family and friends is that they often know us better than we know ourselves.

They give us the gift and burden of a narrative to live in to, or to reject. A sense of comfort in being known, or a frustration in being locked into a role that feels confining or limiting.

We all have stories--true stories that are told about us by our family and friends. They are the ones we would not tell, the ones we would just as soon never hear again. You know them. They are the ones that are brought out the first time we bring home a new boyfriend or girlfriend. They are told at the rehearsal dinner. They are told at the retirement party. They may sound funny to others, but we would be perfectly content to not be known quite that well. They may be offered in love, but they can too often feel like judgment.

Today is Maundy Thursday and we have arrived with the knowledge that we will hear a story of love. The true story of the love of Jesus. But there is something about the story that makes us a bit uncomfortable, perhaps especially as we enact it later in the service. While we know it is a story of Jesus' love for us, it is also the story that leads us unavoidably towards Good Friday. Towards the cross.

As any story of real love will do, it confronts us with truths we might just as soon avoid.

Jesus knows these intimates. These disciples. He knows things about them they are unwilling and unable to hear about themselves. He knows Judas will betray him. He knows Peter will deny him. And yet, "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end."

This love is symbolized in the foot washing. He interrupts their meal, places himself in the position of servitude. He washes all of their feet. The feet of the clean and the unclean. There is no sorting of sheep and goats. Judas will enter the night to betray Jesus with his feet still damp from Jesus' offer of love.

This act of love is so profound, it throws them off balance. Peter clearly doesn't get it. He is not sure whether to rebuff Jesus, or go for full immersion right on the spot.

But the point is not the discomfort of the ritual. It is the radical intimacy and knowledge that Jesus is offering. They were not worrying about what their feet looked like or whether Jesus was violating first century etiquette. What is ultimately most disconcerting is the love Jesus offers in the context of the foot washing, is the full knowledge of their humanity. The fullness of their beauty and the fullness of their darkness.

Like all of us, Peter would rather control Jesus' self revelation than fully enter in to its mystery. Because the more fully we accept Jesus' offer, the more we have to know about ourselves. We cannot hide our denials and our betrayals from those who know us best. They suffer no illusions of our perfection, nor imagine we have an absence of shortcomings. It is unsettling and uncomfortable.

But I wonder if it is too easy in our own discomfort to mistake that knowledge for judgment? When we say we long to be known, it is really a desire to have our darkness ignored? Can ignorance of our darkness be considered real love?

One of my favorite quotes from St. Ignatius is, "My greatest consolation is knowing that I am a barrier to God's grace." It is a consolation, because it reminds us that God is at the ready, wanting to embrace every aspect of ourselves. If we experience a barrier, it is because it is one of our own building--at least where God is concerned. Our darkness is already known to God. If we are in the business of hiding it, we are blocking the full gift of grace.

The story of Holy Week is not about our inability to stay with Jesus and what rotten people the disciples were. The story of Holy Week is that our darkness is never a surprise to God. Jesus stays with us fully knowing that is who we are and still offers his love to all.

I am still not comfortable with the story of the Princess and the Pea. But I am starting to realize it is a true story for me. A piece of me would much rather arrive at God's door with it all together, my royal status obvious to all. But to expect that of myself is to erect a barrier to God's grace. Because we all arrive with wet hair and a disheveled appearance, bruised by the smallest bits of our own darkness.

But to be really known and loved by God? That seems worth the risk of shedding a few sparkly, dearly held illusions about myself.

Amen

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