

01 April 2021

Writings: Well Intentioned

Peter said, "You will never wash my feet" (John 13:8).

Some time ago, I had a parishioner who really wanted to help out around the Church. Since he came to daily Mass, I gave him the job of setting up the Altar each morning. After showing him how to do on several consecutive days, I decided to see how well he would do on his own. The first day, he put the Chalice on the wrong side of the Altar. The next day, he forgot to put a big host on the Patent. The day after that, he forgot to put water and wine in the cruets. Whenever I tried to discreetly correct his mistake before Mass, he would rush over and try to do it himself and usually made things worse. After a week, I started to get frustrated. Although I appreciated the fact the man was well-intentioned, he was just getting in the way. Fortunately, I was able to find him another job which he did well and the situation was resolved.

In tonight's Gospel, Peter disrupts Christ's attempt to teach an important lesson about discipleship. By doing so, he demonstrates how being well intentioned does not always help one carry out the Christian mission.

Providing the water and basin for a guest to wash their own feet was considered a sign of hospitality within the culture in which Jesus lived (**Luke 7:44**). Yet, the act of washing the feet of another was considered so degrading that a Jewish slave could not be compelled to do so. It is probably for this reason Jesus chose this particular action to teach his disciples a lesson about humility and service. In John's Gospel, Peter's impulsive behaviour is not as prominent as in the other Gospels. He is called Cephas (rock) by Jesus (**John 1:42**) and, when other disciples leave Jesus because of a difficult teaching, he tells his master he has the words of Eternal Life (**John 6:68**). Peter, thinking within the confines of his society, perceives Christ's action as upsetting the proper order of social relationships. He will not allow Jesus to degrade himself. When Christ starts to explain the reasons for his actions Peter wants the extreme opposite: he wants as much of what Jesus is doing as possible. While Peter may be well intentioned, he still doesn't get what Jesus is trying to do. The action is intended to teach a lesson rather than produce a result. After the action is over, Jesus explains more fully its meaning. It also foreshadows the more extreme lesson of humility and service which will be taught the following day on the Cross.

During this Covid 19 Pandemic there are a lot of well intentioned people trying to keep us safe. There are the medical experts who tell us to wear masks as a way to reduce the spread of the virus. There are individuals who wear masks as a way to achieve this objective and provide a good example to others of working for the common good. Then there are the people who harass those who choose not to wear a mask. Although reminding people of the need to wear a mask is appropriate and denying entry to those who refuse to wear one in certain establishments is also acceptable, at what point does this well intentioned action become self defeating. It is selfish for people to refuse to wear a mask. It makes a clear statement that my freedom and preferences are more important than the common good. Yet, the refusal to wear a mask is not the most egregious example of selfish and anti-social behaviour in our society. In addition, harassment could make people more belligerent in refusing to wear a mask. Perhaps, some people will only learn why they need to wear a mask by getting Covid-19. If they need to go to an ICU to stay alive, I hope there is a bed available for them.

The lesson Peter had difficulty learning was that sometimes good intentions rooted in existing social expectations get in the way of the unfolding of God's plan. Among the most difficult situations Christ's disciples face today is dealing with obnoxious and selfish people who refuse to work for the common good. It might be tempting for the best of intentions to teach them a lesson. Yet, like Peter, we could find ourselves hindering rather than helping Jesus. Humility and patience and hard lessons to learn. Nevertheless, they show our ability to put aside social expectations and follow Christ's example.

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