

The Gospel According to Peanuts: Pride, Humility and True Community

John 13:1-17

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In late 2021, Downing College of the University of Cambridge opened an exhibit displaying a number of comic strips and line drawings by Charles Schulz, creator of *Peanuts*. The exhibit focused on one particular character and was titled, “Lucy: Director of Everything”. It’s funny because it’s such a perfect description of the bossy, crabby character we’ve all come to simultaneously love and hate.

If you know Peanuts, you know Lucy. Lucy is confident. She is the character who announces that she has never made a mistake. Apparently, she thought she did at one time, but she was wrong. Lucy is outspoken. After coaching Charlie Brown to repeatedly saying that he believes he can fly his recalcitrant kite until he is shouting as loud as he can, Lucy says she’ll bet ten-to-one that he can’t. And Lucy has opinions. A lot of opinions including advice she is always ready to share. From how Charlie Brown should direct the school Christmas play to why Linus must give up his blanket, she knows exactly what everyone else should and should NOT be doing. In her famous psychiatric booth with its simple sign saying, “The doctor is in”, Lucy will tell you what is wrong with you for five cents. Five cents! It may be the most affordable psychiatric consultation in American history.

We laugh because Lucy’s behavior is so exaggerated. Her arrogance and entitlement are so outlandish. But we also laugh because we recognize something of ourselves in her. Even Charles Schulz acknowledged, “Lucy comes from that part of me that’s capable of saying mean and sarcastic things, which is not a good trait to have, so Lucy gives me a good outlet.” Truth be told, there is a little Lucy van Pelt in all of us. We have opinions about other people’s choices. We know how our spouse should spend their time and how other people’s children should behave. We know what is wrong with our neighbors, the weaknesses of our bosses, even how the church ought to do things. We are remarkably gifted at identifying the places where other people need improvement. We are sometimes less gifted at identifying our own.

That is why this Gospel passage from John is so important as we grow as disciples. Because Jesus gives us a very different picture of how to relate to others. Jesus gives us a towel.

John tells us that this happens on the night before Jesus' crucifixion.

It is an extraordinary moment. Jesus knows what is coming. He knows Judas will betray him. He knows Peter will deny him. He knows the disciples will scatter. He knows that suffering and death are just hours away. In the middle of all of that, Jesus gets up from the table. He takes off his outer robe. He ties a towel around himself. He pours water into a basin, and he begins to wash the disciples' feet.

The teacher kneels. The one whom the disciples call Master takes the position of the lowest servant in the household. John tells us why. Jesus loved his own who were in the world, and he loved them to the end. That is where this story begins. It begins with love and Jesus' humility flows from that love.

We sometimes misunderstand humility. We imagine that humility means thinking poorly of ourselves. "I'm not very talented." "I'm not important." "I don't have much to offer." But that isn't what we see in Jesus. Jesus doesn't wash feet because he has forgotten who he is. He washes feet because he knows exactly who he is. He knows that he comes from God. He knows that he belongs to God. He knows where he is going. Because he is secure in that identity, he doesn't have to go about proving himself. He can kneel. He can serve. He can put someone else's needs ahead of his own.

The word "humility" comes from the Latin word "humus" meaning earth or ground. The word "human" comes from the same root. When we are humble, we have our feet on the ground. We are rooted in the earth from which God created us.

Henri Nouwen once wrote: "Humility is the soil in which all other virtues grow." We begin with humility, remembering who we are in the vast story of God's Creation without diminishing our value or the value of others. Humility doesn't mean pretending that we have no gifts. It means recognizing that our gifts are gifts. They are not trophies. They are not proof that we are better than someone else. They are gifts we have received from God, and gifts are meant to be shared. Humility frees us from the exhausting need to prove ourselves. We don't have to win every argument. We don't have to receive credit for every good thing. We don't have to make sure everyone knows how much we have done. We can simply love. We can simply serve. We can pick up the towel.

Perhaps that is what Jesus is teaching us when he kneels before his disciples. The truly secure person is free to serve. The person who knows they are loved does not have to be the center of attention. The person who knows they belong to God can make room for someone else. Jesus knows who he is. Because he knows who he is, he can kneel.

Then Peter enters the story. Peter sees Jesus kneeling before him and says: "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus tells him: "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." But Peter refuses. "Never shall you wash my feet."

Now, at first, that sounds humble. "Jesus, you're too important to be doing this for me." But there can be a surprising kind of pride hidden inside our refusal to receive. Some of us are much better at giving than receiving. We will gladly help somebody else. We will cook the meal. We will make the phone call. We will drive someone to an appointment. We will volunteer. We will organize. We will give. But when someone asks us, "How are you doing?" We say, "Fine." Even when we're not. When someone says, "Can I help?" We say, "No, no, I'm all right." Even when we are exhausted. We like being the strong one. The capable one. The dependable one. The one who doesn't need anything.

Yet, community is created through mutual care. Jesus says to Peter: You need to let me do this for you. That is part of the Gospel. Before we serve Christ, Christ serves us. Before we love God, God loves us. Before we offer grace, we receive grace. Before we wash anyone else's feet, Christ washes ours. Our role is to be willing to receive, to allow ourselves to be vulnerable, and to recognize we need God, we need love, we need forgiveness, and we need one another.

When we acknowledge our own need, we can more compassionately see the needs of others. Saint Teresa of Ávila once wrote: "Christ has no body now but yours." She goes on to speak of our hands, our feet, our eyes, and our hearts as the means through which Christ's love is made visible in the world. Marty Javornisky, our wonderful business manager, shared with me recently that someone once told him, "if you want to be humble, serve somebody." That is exactly where Jesus takes us in John 13 when he says, "Do as I have done." In other words: Let my humility become your humility. Let my love become your love. Let my hands become your hands. Let my service become your service.

Jesus finishes washing the disciples' feet and says: "Do you know what I have done to you?" Then he reminds them that they call him Teacher and Lord—and rightly so. Then Jesus says: "If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet."

Jesus turns the basin into a picture of Christian community, a glimpse of the kingdom. The church is meant to be a community of people who serve one another and strengthen each other to be a model of Jesus's love in the world. Church is not a community organized around status. It's not a community where everyone is trying to get to the top. It's not a community where financial gain outweighs love of neighbor. A Christian community is gathered around a towel and a basin. That means someone notices when a person is missing. Someone visits the person who is sick. Someone welcomes the stranger. Someone makes room at the table. Someone listens patiently to the person who has told the same story four times. Someone says, "I'm sorry." Someone says, "I am grateful for your gifts and the person that you are." Someone says, "You belong here." Someone says, "Let me help." Jesus says: This is what my kingdom looks like.

Of course, pride has a way of getting in the middle of all this. Pride, and the desire to be right, and the need to be in control. Yet, even Lucy has her moments of compassion and of service. Remember that on Halloween night, after Linus spends most of the night sleeping in the pumpkin patch waiting for the Great Pumpkin, it is Lucy who comes to find him, carry him home, and tuck him in with his blanket. And on Mondays, when it's laundry day in the van Pelt household and Linus is at the end of his rope without his blanket, it is Lucy who goes and gets it, applying what she calls a spiritual tourniquet.

"If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them." We have a choice dozens of times a day to choose between pride and humility, self and others, criticism and compassion, assuming the worst and assuming the best. When that happens, may we have the humility to stop for a moment and listen to the voice of Jesus saying, Where is the towel? Pick it up. Kneel down. Make room. Serve someone. Receive grace. And follow me.

May it be so. Amen.