

Prepare!
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Last week I saw this post on Facebook that caught my attention and touched my heart. So I decided to share it on my page. It's a tweet from Steve Bezner, who is a pastor in Houston.

It says, "Sometimes I joke about what I'd do if I had one day to live. Eat junk, go crazy, etc. Today it hit me: Jesus knew. And he washed feet."

It's a good tweet, and a provocative reminder that Jesus lived his life very intentionally and so should we.

A Facebook friend of mine who identifies herself as an atheist commented on this. And before I tell you what she said I should preface it by saying I've actually never met her in person before – she is a friend of a friend of my sister's - and most of our FB conversations are about Baby Yoda. Anyway, her comment was, "This is a sense of humility I hadn't expected."

It made me wonder if she knows the story of Jesus washing his disciple's feet.

Could it be that she's never been introduced to the Jesus we Christians know so well and take for granted? Of course, it also made me wonder about her experience of Christians that would lead her to find humility surprising. Even more than making me wonder, her comment made me wish I had more atheists in my life to make such insightful observations.

It takes a very humble person to clearly point the way to Jesus. No one who is full of themselves can possibly do it. John the Baptist is such a person. Born into the well-respected family of the Priestly clan, John turned his back on the Temple and chose a downward path as a street preacher living rough and on the margins. Even as he began to gain notoriety for his fiery judgment sermons, drawing big crowds for his baptism services, John made it clear that this was not about him. John was calling people to align themselves with the Kingdom of Heaven, which is really another way of saying that he was challenging people see the Big Picture and to recognize how things truly and finally are.

John's whole life and ministry was one of preparation.

He was preparing himself and his hearers to receive the One. John pointed the way toward the coming of the One who was greater than he was, stronger than he was, the One whose sandals he was not fit to carry. John's was a life of a thousand acts of letting go of his own ego and his own agenda in order to give a clear and unobstructed view of the coming Messiah. In stark contrast to the Pharisees who were playing small with life and frantically working to build and maintain their own little kingdoms, John lived to build up the kingdom of another. John was the greatest of the prophets, Jesus would say, precisely because he was willing to be Second Fiddle.

John's model provides a great job description for Jesus' disciples.

Our job is to prepare people to meet Christ when he shows up in their life. This could be any minute now, so the urgency is very great. When the world catches a glimpse of the Jesus of the gospels instead of the Jesus of our culture's making, he turns out to be Someone they have longed to meet by never expected. By our words and by our example, we get to point the way to Jesus Christ and say, "I'm trying to live my best life, but he's the One you want to meet. I want to decrease, so he can increase."

Can you think of a more freeing ministry than that? What a relief to know that our work is incredibly important, but at the same time it isn't about us! Our job is to call people to repentance – a change a mind and a change of direction – so that they can meet the One Person who makes True Transformation possible.

When we choose John's self-emptying, I-must-decrease-so-Jesus-can-increase kind of life, there are some inevitable consequences:

We stop sweating the small stuff. John urgently called on people to stop sleep walking through life, going with the flow and going along with the empty rhetoric and emptier rituals of his culture. John wanted people to repent of the momentary dramas, hurts, agendas that drove them. He had lost patience with phoniness and maintaining glittering personas. When we become single-minded in pointing people to Jesus we will notice all the little things we have tended to obsess over and ask, "Will any of this really matter in the light of eternity?"

We find ourselves living at the edge of the inside. John's ministry took place in the wilderness, on the margin between the insiders and the outsiders. From that position he, like all good prophets, could understand and relate to people on the inside but also connect with those who were excluded and felt judged by the insiders. What the wilderness places in your life, your

community, and your world. Do you believe that in these places of loneliness, of broken relationships, and of failures – that there is room for grace?

We become relentless in the pursuit of righteousness. When the right judgement of God is preached as John preaches it, it awakens a desire for righteousness in us. The word “righteousness” shows up throughout today’s readings, and it has become something of a churchie word, so we need to reclaim it and reframe it so we can practice it in the world and point people to the Righteous One. Whenever I see the word “righteousness” in the bible, in my head I change it to “right-relatedness.”

Righteousness is the state in which people are in healthy and affirming relationships with one another. Righteousness calls us to live morally, without moralizing. It calls us not to say, “I haven’t done anything wrong,” but to ask the other, “What do I need to do to make things right?”

Righteousness has forgiveness and reconciliation at its heart. When an entire people change their collective minds about the way things are and chooses to set them right, that is called justice. When nations do it, there is peace. According the psalmist, when leaders choose righteousness, not only to the people flourish but all of creation thrives.

We point the way to the One because that is all we can do. We can only point the way. We point to the Changer, but it is Jesus who brings the Change. We can awaken a desire for righteousness, but Jesus’ gift of the Holy Spirit is the only way righteousness is possible and actual. We can baptize with water- the thing we have - But Jesus baptizes with the fiery Holy Spirit, which only He can provide. If we try to bring righteousness about in our strength while neglecting the work of pointing people to the One Who Makes Righteousness Possible, then we will end up disappointed, empty, and bitter. People who know only Law and nothing of Grace always end up this way.

Since Jesus’ ministry is about fire and the Holy Spirit, People need to be prepared for it. If they are unprepared to receive it, it only brings the burning of self-condemnation. The small ego-stuff gets burned away and they are left with nothing. But if they are hungry to receive it, Jesus brings the refining fire, and the healing of Holy Spirit grace. Who will prepare them? Who will point the way?

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