

“Jesu, Jesu” and a re-ordered world

Sermon by Robb McCoy

In this new sermon series we have asked Mark Swessinger to share his favorite hymns. Mark has been our music director for 21 years. He is retiring this June, and we are leading up to his last Sunday as our music director with a series of interviews before the sermon. We will talk about his favorite hymns and share stories of why they are special to him. The first one we shared was “Jesu, Jesu.” This is, at the same time, the newest and oldest hymn of the ones he selected.

It is newest because it was published in 1963 by a Scottish missionary named Tom Colvin. Oldest because it was written to a folk song in Ghana that probably predates many of our published hymnody.

In the midst of a wave of African nations gaining their independence from European powers, Colvin realized the old model of mission work was obsolete and destructive. Colvin was a part of a new wave of mission workers who realized that there were already tremendous gifts in the places he worked. Instead of bringing his “right way” of doing things to communities, he discovered the beauty, faith, and creativity that was already there. He used the beautiful Ghanaian tune and set words to it that described Jesus washing the disciples’ feet in his farewell discourse.

As the story is told to us in the Gospel of John, Jesus shocks his friends when, in the middle of supper, he takes off his cloak, gets on his knees, and begins to wash their feet. It was an act usually most of these men usually did themselves. If they were guests at a more well-to-do home, it would have been the job of servants. It was a calculated act - one that Jesus was using to make a point. It wasn’t about the water or cleanliness - as Peter found out after he protested. It was about humility. More than this, it was a model for them who would become the leaders in his movement after he was gone.

Leadership in the Kingdom of God is about service. Power is not something to wield for one’s own gain. It is something to be used in service to others. When Jesus knelt at their feet, he was showing them what it means to know God. It was a reversal of roles and an object



lesson for how God wants power to be revealed.

The song “Jesus, Jesu” reflects what can happen when people set aside power dynamics and start from a place of mutuality and respect. When we realize that those we serve have something to offer, something truly beautiful can take place.

In John, Jesus uses the word “abide” to describe what it means to follow him. We abide in Christ and Christ abides in God. Abide is to have a deep, intimate relationship. Abiding in Christ breaks down power structures, hierarchies, and social norms.

In the story of John 13, Peter reminds us of another difficult truth. Sometimes it is hard to allow yourself to be served. For many Christians, service comes easy. They understand the sacrifice, dedication, and time it takes to serve others. In soup kitchens, clothes closets, neighborhood clean-ups, Christians are often there to serve. It becomes more difficult, however, to be served.

There is an odd vulnerability in accepting help. For those who grow up in Midwest humility or in service professions, it can be very uncomfortable to allow someone else to wash our feet.

This is why the formation of a World Relief Good Neighbor Team is so important. As we gather a group of volunteers to help welcome a refugee family into our community, it not just about “us” serving “them.” A true Good Neighbor Team offers time, energy, and know-how; but more importantly, they offer relationship. They offer friendship.

Members of our new GNT (sign up now by texting or emailing Pastor Robb) will have a chance to serve, but in so doing they will be blessed with friendship, learning, and a new perspective on what it means to abide with Christ.