

The First Mennonite Church of Vineland  
"Knowing and not knowing."  
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There are some things you never want to hear your doctor say, 'whoops', 'uh-oh', or 'hmm, I've never seen that before', but more seriously, you never want to hear, 'we found something.' That time between knowing that there is something there and knowing what that something can be can be painfully long. Even longer is not knowing what's going to happen with this 'something.'

The scariest part is the not knowing. We, of course, ask questions. Is this a normal kind of 'something', or is it the bad kind of 'something'? Is this a wait-and-see kind of 'something,' the something you just monitor or the 'we gotta get a stuff in order' kind of 'something.' Will this be a 'we got this' kind of 'something,' or a 'we've gotta move quickly on this' kind of 'something?' Who would have thought something could be so scary?

There is a time before something is found, when we didn't need to know things, and there is a time after something is found, when all that we want to do is to know things. It's in those situations where we long for, we yearn for, some sense of control, some sense of meaning to what's happening. All that we want are answers, because so much feels unknown and uncertain. It's the knowing what's going on that gives us some sense of control.

When medical things come up for me, I want to know what's going on. I want to know the causes, and I want to know what the possible courses of action are. Treatments, I want to know with some certainty how things will end up. I've told myself the myth that if I know something, I have control over it. And so to put my mind at ease, I've caught myself doing the one thing that someone scared should never, ever do: I look for some answers, some certainty, from Dr. Google. Please, learn from my mistakes. Don't do that. Ever. Dr. Google is never the place to go for reassurance, especially when it comes to medical stuff.

And yet, I can't help myself, I still search out more knowledge with the hopes that it will still my spirit. When the world is falling apart, the next news article will give me some peace of mind, yeah, right. When something feels funny in my body, I look to Dr. Google to help me diagnose it. Sure, that will turn out well. When I don't understand something, I'll research it from sunup to sundown, trying to wrap my head around it by sheer force of will; it didn't work in undergrad, still doesn't work. But yet, I keep telling myself that the more I know, the more I can master it, the more I can be certain, the more I'm in control. I'm slowly coming to see that as a lie, there are some situations in life that no matter how much knowledge you have, it will never be enough, and you will never be in control.

We are a people who like to be in control. We, generally speaking, like to know what's going on. Knowing is a way of feeling in control. One congregation I was with was dancing around the idea of dropping the Sunday morning bulletin, and while most people could do without the pages of announcements, the one thing they could not do without was the printed order of service. Holding that page gave them a sense of control, a sense of power, knowing what was coming up, and if something was missed, they could correct the worship leader.

In our scripture reading this morning, the disciples are forced into an experience in which they have to let go of control because they have no idea what Jesus is doing.

As we've heard, shortly after they had all gathered for supper, Jesus did the most unexpected, incredible, scandalous, and humiliating thing. He stands up, goes over to the footwashing

basin, picks up the towel used to wash the feet of the guests, calls the disciples over and begins to wash their feet.

To Western, North Americans, this practice seems just odd, a bit uncomfortable, and likely unnecessary. This is one of those instances in scripture where not knowing the setting or culture works against us to understand the meaning of this.

Footwashing, at the time of Jesus, wasn't a ritual, at least no more than Canadian's taking their shoes off when you visit someone's home is a ritual. Footwashing was possibly one of the more remedial activities done in a 1st Century Palenstinian home. It was usually relegated, or assigned to the lowest servant in the house. Their job was to wash the feet of guests, well-worn feet, feet caked in dirt and maybe other things. No socks or toejam here, no manicured nails, no soft soles; these were feet that saw it all. You may have washed thoroughly before coming to dinner or to visit, but along the way, however well you washed your feet, they became filthy.

And so, Jesus, picking up this mantle, picks up the task of the lowliest servant. And the disciples, who live in a culture of honour and shame, are beside themselves as Jesus takes up this shameful act. In their minds, Jesus is the one they should' ascribe honour to, and yet, Jesus embraces this shame.

And Peter protests. He doesn't know what Jesus is doing. Well, he does, and he doesn't. He thinks he knows. And so he protests. "No teacher." He argues. "No, Lord." He pleads. But he doesn't really get it. He thinks this is a hygiene problem; he imagines it's a hosting issue, and perceives it as a commentary on his cleanliness. But it's something more, and he doesn't get it.

"Not just my feet, Lord, all of me then." Yearning to be the one who gets it, maybe even be the one who gets it first. Grasping to gain control of an uncomfortable situation, he jumps to conclusions, trying desperately to understand Jesus. But again, he misses the point. He doesn't understand. He doesn't know. He's not ready to know. Neither do the rest of the disciples; nonetheless, Jesus asks, perhaps rhetorically, "Do you know what I have done to you?"

When I was out west, I was often called upon to lead the fall retreat for the Grade 12 class of RJC (Rosthern Junior College). The teachers wanted to frame this senior class retreat more as a spiritual retreat. Knowing this, I would often craft the sessions to lead us to footwashing as the last session.

As seniors in the school, they were looked up to. They were seen as leaders of the student body. They were seen as examples for the other students to follow. They were the most likely to be team captains, student body presidents, leads in the annual musical, or residence representatives. And it's easy for that power, popularity and privilege to get to your head. Especially when you're a teenager. However, in the community setting that was RJC, the other thing that they were was servants to one another. First, to each other, and then to the rest of the student body.

Each year that I led the retreat, I told the story, modelled an example, and then I stepped back and watched as the basin of water was passed from person to person, from students, to teachers, and residence deans, each taking turns washing, drying, and attending to one another. And I listened as the awkward giggles that usually accompanied the first quarter of our time quieted, and as a palpable reverence fell upon the practice. Intuitively, the students slowly began to notice something was happening.

The sense of awkwardness was released and was replaced by a feeling, a sense that something bigger moved in that time and space. Rather than fighting the awkwardness, rather than protesting how gross the water became, or how soggy the towels got, these students understood that something enchanting was occurring. They were being led to something more significant than a scrub from a pumice stone. God's Spirit was moving. I like to think that God was at work transforming them.

When Peter protested, when the disciples didn't get it, Jesus didn't throw out the bathwater. Jesus remained and told them to trust me. To say it another way, Jesus said, trust the process. You will get there, you will understand soon enough. Your questions will get answered. But for now, trust this, trust me. Don't rush for the answers, for they will come.

How do we, then, dwell in this dissonance of knowing a little of what is happening, but not fully understanding what's going on? How do we, then, live with something that is happening, but not knowing what that something is? How do we live in between the certainty of what we see, hear, smell, touch, and taste, and the uncertainty of what the next moments will bring?

Do we, like Peter, push back, protest, argue, and struggle? Do we fight to know more? To settle, solve the uncertainty? Or, do we just "go with it" as presumably some of the disciples did? Do we trust the process, as the RJC students did? Are we willing to trust Jesus' 'you will know in time.' Are we willing to be patient in our unknowing? Are we willing to dwell in the uncertainty, holding to the trust that someday we may be gifted with the knowledge to understand? Or maybe we hold the tension, and be curious? Asking, Jesus, what are you doing? God, what is happening here? Holy Spirit, where have you been?

As we watch the world spiral into another Middle-Eastern war, as we watch another impoverished nation collapse and be manipulated by strongman economic policies, and as we see and hear people suffering around the world from old and new conflicts. As we search to know what to do in the midst of our helplessness, what might it mean for us to confess that maybe right now there's not much we can do, can we trust that in the interim, God is present there?

As we listen to the joys and concerns of our community, whether that be the church here or our local communities, can we be curious in seeking God, rather than searching for answers to our questions? Can we cast our gaze to see Jesus' radical love present in our neighbours?

And as we reflect on the uncertainty within our own hearts, can we gently lift it to God, with the same curiosity that looks for Jesus' radical love? A love that assures that we do not dwell in this unsteady space in our lives alone, that the Jesus whom we lean on is true and trustworthy, is there.

I think footwashing is a powerful practice. And, at the same time, it was a wholly disorienting practice. It upends assumptions, leading us to realize that, in the end, there's much that we don't know. And it models for us the radical, servant love that Jesus holds for his followers. We might not understand it, and that's OK, that's likely not the point. Rather, the point is one of trust, trusting Jesus, trusting the process, trusting that one day, some day, we might understand. And until then, we live in the dissonance of knowing and not.

Amen