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Righteous Reclining

Text: John 13:18-30

Sometimes when there is a gathering of the people of faith, the assumption is made that *everybody present* is a committed follower of Jesus. That is not true in our day, and it was not even true when Jesus the Christ walked the earth. In the verse preceding our text, Jesus delivers the sobering line, *you are not all clean* (13:11). Paraphrase: *Everybody here is not all in.* Demonic forces are already at work (v. 2);

Bruce Milne comments on this passage and quips, “This demonic intrusion is now confronted, though, as ever, in love”.[[1]](#footnote-2)

Our Lord *was* not, and *is* not, naive. Jesus knew that they were some who followed Him with pure hearts and motives. Then there were others. Some wanted simply to see another miracle, a sign, a nugget of wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:22-23; John 6:2).

In this very intimate setting, Jesus lets his inner circle know that *Jesus* knows this is a mixed group. Verse 21 is dripping in sadness:

*When Jesus had said these things, He was troubled in spirit, and testified and said, “Most assuredly, I say to you, one of you will betray Me.”*

Wow! He said what many of them knew to be true.

“Some of us here aren’t loving the Master.”

“Some here are traitors.”

“Some, in this room, are possessed by the evil one.”

Jesus was troubled in spirit (v. 21) and the disciples were perplexed (v. 22). The Greek word for *troubled* in verse 21(tarasso) is a used word use to describe deep distress (John 11:33) It is used to describe the troubling of the waters in the pool at Bethesda (John 5:7).

Even then, the stirred up, agitated Jesus doesn’t kick His disciples to the curb. This would be a setting, it seems to me, in which Jesus could become justifiably detached, aloof, nonchalant. Yet, Jesus allows physical touch and intimacy. I’m not sure I would have welcomed people being “all up under me” in such a setting. Look at verses 23 and 25.

A Matthew 25 congregation, which we strive to be, is a congregation which relates to each other, partly through touch. In Matthew 25, Jesus commends people not for throwing rhetoric at the prisoner, but for *visiting* the prisoner. The hungry were not analyzed. The hungry were *fed*. That involves touching. In Matthew 25, the people on Christ’s right hand, His sheep, visited the sick and fed the hungry. These are hands-on acts that involve touching.

Let’s get appropriately physical!

**A vital faith community is one in which those who would, if left to themselves, not reject those who want to get close, but actually encourage appropriate leaning. I call it righteous reclining.**

Back to the setting in John 13. Jesus is so full of love that physical affection and expression override betrayal. Did you see it in the text? Jesus *knew* He was going to be betrayed (v. 11, 21). This has been anticipated in early scripture (v. 18; Psalm 41:9)

The Righteous Redeemer allows the betrayer to remain in the room with Him. Jesus loves, and even welcomes, the traitor. Hallelujah! What a Savior!

The self-examination starts around the room- “Is it I?”

Jesus identifies the betrayer (v. 26) and feeds him!!!!! Earlier, Jesus washed Judas’ feet, *knowing* Judas was a traitor.

All the while Jesus the Righteous is reclining at table, treacherous thoughts are running through the mind of Judas. This narrative makes me love Jesus even more than I loved Him last week. Jesus loves the betraying one, the wayward one, the disobedient one, the rebellious one.

I’ll call her Hilda. She was a young lady who grew up in the same home church as did I. We were, for a period of time, very close. Her father died when she was 14. One evening, several of us were hanging out at someone’s house and Hilda asked me if she could put her head on my stomach. She wanted my shirt lifted. She went on to explain that one of the ways she and her father connected was that she would rest her head on his stomach, skin-to-skin. I complied and she found it comforting. This is Jesus in that room that night. Supper is ended. Jesus is being very tactile, very hands-on. Jesus

* Rises from supper
* Lays aside his garment
* Girds Himself with a towel
* Pours water into a basin
* Washes the feet of the disciples
* Wipes the feet of the disciples

In addition, when they are finished eating and Jesus is reclining at the table, Jesus welcomes a disciple resting against Him. Most scholars believe that the “disciple whom Jesus loved” was John.

I’m fascinated by a Jesus who would tolerate the presence of a Judas and who let John be all over Him.

He never pushes Judas away. He never tells the disciple who is leaning on Him to get up. He stays there, teaching, serving, loving. I aim to be a righteous recliner who leans on the Lord Jesus and who *also* invites others to lean on me; to rest against my chest or shoulder. Jesus, on His way to Calvary, has time for foot-washing and touching and being leaned upon. Jesus, that unique fully God/fully human One, cared about humans, about flesh and blood beings.

C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity:*

*“There is no good trying to be more spiritual than God. God never meant man to be a purely spiritual creature. That is why He uses material things like bread and wine to put the new life into us. We may think this rather crude and unspiritual. God does not: He invented eating. He likes matter. He invented it.*” [[2]](#footnote-3)

Lore Ferguson Wilbert:

*If our bodies matter to God, they should matter to us. And they should matter to us as they are, not only how they will someday be.[[3]](#footnote-4)*

*“Respect for the person is inseparable from respect from the body. . . . A biblical ethic is incarnational. We are made in God’s image to reflect God’s character, both in our minds and in our bodily actions. There is no division, no alienation. We are embodied beings.”[[4]](#footnote-5)*

Sam Allberry has written,

“Our Western culture has so identified sex and intimacy that in popular thinking the two are virtually identical. We cannot conceive of intimacy occurring without it in some way being sexual. So when we hear how previous generations described friendship in such intimate terms, we roll our eyes and say, ‘Well they were obviously gay.’ Any intimacy, we imagine, must ultimately be sexual.”[[5]](#footnote-6)

**Illus**.

Lore Ferguson Wilbert tells the story of a pastor who refused to hug women and Lore had provocative questions to ask him.

*I noticed a dear pastor friend of mine refused to hug any woman ever—even from the side. Eventually I asked him why he wasn’t hugging the women in his congregation, and he said, “Well, my wife was touched sinfully by a pastor when she was in high school and I just never want to give her a reason to suspect me of doing the same to other women.” I thought about his words for a few weeks. I could see his good intentions and posture toward his wife, but I also had a few questions so I followed back up with him: “Have you considered the possibility that you may need to speak and care for your wife by helping her to see that while she was sinned against, not every man has the same intention or heart? And have you asked if you are submitting to your wife’s fear above God’s intention for caring for His sheep, and in being mastered by your wife’s fear, if you alienate the women in your care as a pastor and leave them feeling like a potential threat to your wife’s peace? Or, assuming they don’t even know why you refrain from hugging them, it is possible that they assume they are the reason? As though they are a threat to your body or ministry? And lastly, have you weighed the risk that you are doing an opposite but just as harmful action to women in your church by not interacting with them in faithful, humble, godly touch?” When we set up boundaries like “I’ll never hug a person of the opposite sex” as a reaction to present fears or possible outcomes, we are not being faithful to the ways of Jesus, but being driven by weak arguments, unresolved personal histories, or “What ifs?” That’s not the way of the Christian. Christians should have their eyes set on the flourishing of all people, to withhold a good thing from an entire gender class as a precautionary measure keeps us from the goal of human flourishing.*

I repeat:

**A vital faith community is one in which those who would, if left to themselves, not reject those who want to get close, but actually *encourage* appropriate leaning. I call it righteous reclining.**

Amen

Benediction:

“Behold, your God in flesh. Behold, your Creator becoming like His creation. Behold, your Savior wrestling with temptation and fear. Behold, your Lord rising again. Behold, your crumbling, cracking, quaking, trembling, itching, comfort-seeking body, one day made new”.[[6]](#footnote-7)

1. Bruce Milne. *The Message of John.* InterVarsity Press, 1993. P. 200 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. 57 C. S. Lewis, Mere Christianity (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 65 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Lore Ferguson Wilbert. *Handle With Care* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Nancy Pearcey, Love Thy Body (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, 2018), 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Sam Allberry, “Why Single Is Not the Same as Lonely,” The Gospel Coalition, July 11, 2016, 6, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org /article/why-single-is-not-same-as-lonely/. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Lore Ferguson Wilbert. *Handle With Care* [↑](#footnote-ref-7)