

God with Us

(Finding Jesus on Our Knees)

John 14:15-21

From the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
Mother's Day 14 May 2023
Matt Matthews

"I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. —John 14:18

Are you famous? Here's a poem by Naomi Shihad Nye called "Famous" in which she turns the idea of "fame" sideways.

The river is famous to the fish.

*The loud voice is famous to silence,
which knew it would inherit the earth
before anybody said so.*

*The cat sleeping on the fence is famous to the birds
watching him from the birdhouse.*

The tear is famous, briefly, to the cheek.

*The idea you carry close to your bosom
is famous to your bosom.*

*The boot is famous to the earth,
more famous than the dress shoe,
which is famous only to floors.*

*The bent photograph is famous to the one who carries it
and not at all famous to the one who is pictured.*

*I want to be famous to shuffling men
who smile while crossing streets,
sticky children in grocery lines,
famous as the one who smiled back.*

*I want to be famous in the way a pulley is famous,
or a buttonhole, not because it did anything spectacular,*

but because it never forgot what it could do.

Jesus wants us to be famous for loving the unlovable. Jesus wants us to be famous for walking away from the gossip; Jesus wants us to be famous for standing with the hard-to-understand, un-popular woman; Jesus wants us to be famous to the hungry neighbor; famous for sharing a meal with him; famous for learning his name. Jesus wants us to be famous for bridging the gap between the stranger; Jesus wants us to be famous for being an active Christian in a secular world, famous for worshiping God, famous for being the church in the world, famous for saying no to the status quo, famous for welcoming the outsider in.

Jesus wants the hosts of heaven to know who we are for living the gospel on earth as it is in heaven. And when we're famous to the angels for loving like that, we might be lonely in this world. Because this world doesn't always reward standing up for love and justice. It can be lonely when you're this kind of famous—and to be clear, this is not the "fame" that the world often notices.

When Jesus tells his disciples that he will not leave them orphaned, it's one of the saddest and most hopeful verses in all of scripture. It's sad because he knew that when they followed him they would, sometimes, feel alone. These words are hopeful, because Jesus is pledging his presence with his friends long after he is gone. *I'll be near you by the power of the Holy Spirit. When you love others, that's when you will see me face to face. I won't leave you orphaned or alone.*

* * *

Rev. Isaiah Buti, a black pastor during the days of South African Apartheid, invited a white chief justice to his black church for Maundy Thursday services to participate in a foot washing service. During a time when whites and blacks were made by law to be separated, the judge readily agreed. White man. Black church. Powder keg? All eyes were watching.

At the service. The judge washed Martha Fortuin's feet. The white chief justice washed that woman's black feet. He dried her black feet. And then, before going back to take his seat, he took her feet in his hands and, on his knees, gently kissed them both.^[1]

Love has no place in our world? It does if you *insist* on putting it there. Love has no power in the world? It's the only power that leads to life. This is the

how Jesus wants us to be famous. And this is the way many of our mothers are famous to their children—children who noticed their mother’s small acts of bravery and sacrifice.

Martha looked into the justice’s eyes and she saw Jesus. The chief justice looked into Martha’s eyes and he saw Jesus.

See? I told you? Even after all these centuries, I will not leave you orphaned.

AMEN.

[1] p 494, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol 2, Pastoral Perspective by Nancy J. Ramsey. See also:

(1) <https://www.riversideparishes.co.uk/washingofthefeet.htm> (2) <https://www.moosoneeanglican.ca/holy-week-2022-a-message-from-archbishop-anne/>