

## **Christian Leadership : Leadership :: Geriatrics : Medicine**

*Maundy Thursday*

A couple of years ago, I read this New Yorker article about aging and the art of geriatric medicine.<sup>1</sup> In the article, the writer, a surgeon named Atul Gawande, decided to sit in on some patient visits of one of his colleagues, who was a geriatrician, a doctor for elderly folks. The first patient of the day was an eighty-five-year-old woman with a long list of ailments. Back pain was the primary complaint, but there was also arthritis, glaucoma, high blood pressure, incontinence, and an old colon cancer that, according to a recent test, might have metastasized to a lung. (Old age, as they say, is not for sissies.)

Now to any ordinary doctor, the obvious priorities in this list would be the cancer, which could be life-threatening, and the back, which was the most painful. But to Gawande's surprise, the geriatrician virtually ignored these complaints. Instead he interviewed the woman extensively about how she spent her day, and then he asked her to take off her shoes. This is where he did the most thorough examining. The article says, "He took her feet in his hands, one at a time. He inspected them inch by inch—the soles, the toes, the web spaces." Sure enough, although the woman was otherwise in decent shape, "Her feet were swollen. The toenails were unclipped. There were sores between the toes. And the balls of her feet had thick, rounded calluses." After the examination, the geriatrician made some suggestions about eating and socializing more, but his only medical referral was to a foot doctor. Why such attention to the feet? Because the single greatest danger to life and independence for us as we move into our senior years is not

cancer or back pain but falling. And the feet of elderly people almost always tell the truth about neglect and the risk factors it heightens.

But the story is even more relevant than that. It turns out that, despite a huge increase in the number of seniors in our country, this field of geriatrics remains a very low priority for hospitals and for doctors looking to specialize. It lacks the glamour of other specialties, for one thing, which thrive on new medicines and new devices to make people "as good as new." As one geriatrician in the article, himself an elderly gentleman, puts it, in geriatrics you have to deal with the "old crock" who can't hear you well, may need things explained more than once, and has a long list of complaints most of which will not get better. Maybe even more to the point, much of western medicine likes to traffic in the illusion of immortality, the fantasy that the body can be indefinitely perpetuated. But geriatrics swims against that stream. Practicing geriatrics requires acknowledging the impending breakdown of the body and working within those limitations to extend comfort and independence as long as possible. It requires leaving the cancer and the back pain alone, and doing the humble work of tending to people's feet.

This quality really captures the kind of servanthood that Jesus is teaching as he kneels to tend to the feet of his disciples in our gospel reading. Then, as now, feet were unglamorous and dirty, and to wash the feet of another was to take a position of lower status and servanthood in relation to that other. No wonder Peter exclaims in shock, "Lord, are *you* going to wash *my* feet?" No Lord washes the feet of his followers. No leader stoops to the menial task reserved for the servant of the household. It would be like the CEO of a corporation going around cleaning the office bathrooms. So what Jesus

does here is highly provocative, and Peter is probably not the only one whom it makes uncomfortable.

But the message is clear. Following Jesus means learning to check our egos at the door, because the leadership that Jesus models and demands is the leadership of one who gives away all pride, all selfishness, all grasping for status or admiration or power. If we were to frame this idea as an SAT analogy, we'd say that Christian leadership is to leadership in general what geriatrics is to medicine in general. It is the self-emptying variety. It releases grandiosity. It lets go of glamour and fame and physical immortality and any other incentive that might obscure the best interests of those who are being served. It kneels down and washes the feet of its followers.

Really, the washing of feet is a concrete expression of the new commandment that Jesus gives in today's gospel: "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." So as we move into our time of foot-washing, let us remember what we are expressing in this ritual: humble servanthood, loving care for one another, and the simple acknowledgment of our mortality and our dependence on God for everything we have. For, as Jesus says, "by this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

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<sup>i</sup> This and all other references to this article from Atul Gawande, "The Way We Age Now," *The New Yorker*, April 30, 2007. Accessed online on 4/8/09 at [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/04/30/070430fa\\_fact\\_gawande?currentPage=all](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/04/30/070430fa_fact_gawande?currentPage=all).