



The Lamb Center

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” John 13:34-35

Her clothes were crusted with dried urine, she stank to high heaven, she was covered in bruises, she was talking in what we call “word salad” (a jumble of words with little or no meaning), and her long hair was in a stinking mat on top of her head, a solid mass like a wool sweater that went through the wash. She was in terrible shape.

It was a moment of radical discipleship. “Margaret,” a former guest, an elderly, seriously mentally ill woman with a long history of homelessness, had reappeared after being missing for six months. For days we tried to engage with her, to encourage her to bathe and change, to go into a shelter and get a bed, all to no avail.



Then one day after closing, my colleague Angela sat on a bench with her outside and listened to her ramble. At an opportune moment, Angela invited her to come inside and shower while the building was quiet, and the woman agreed. Our amazing laundry volunteer accepted the most horrifying load of laundry she’d ever seen and provided everything needed for an overdue shower, a complete clean change of clothes from our clothing closet, and bladder protection products. Angela checked in with me partway through the shower, and after her report of the woman’s emaciated condition, I called Adult Protective Services and the county Office to Prevent and End Homelessness to advocate for extra help. A space was found on the couch at the Bailey’s shelter and an outreach worker, Danica, was dispatched to pick her up and take her to Bailey’s where she could stay on the couch until a bed became available. At some point, I looked up from my phone, and Angela was standing in the door of my office, suds dripping off her gloved hands, and she said “I don’t think I can save her hair.”

I followed to the bathroom and watched with my heart in my throat as the woman sat on the bench in the handicapped stall and Angela gently tried to loosen the mats of hair with conditioner. Picture a frail, bruised, starved-looking elderly woman mumbling to herself as a healthy young woman - who could have gone home from work hours ago - is tenderly, carefully trying to loosen the mats in her hair and wash away the crust on her scalp. It was heartbreaking, and a little gross, but it was possibly the most holy thing I have ever witnessed. It was like looking through a window into that upper room and getting a peek at Jesus washing the feet of his disciples.

I wish I had a perfect ending to this story, but we had to give up on saving her hair. Angela bravely inserted her fingers under the mats of hair so I could safely cut away the mats without injuring the woman’s poor scabby scalp. Danica arrived, and the three of us worked as a team, teasing out the remains of the mats and rinsing away the debris so I could try and shape her now very short hair into a style. Danica is now our strong ally at the Bailey’s shelter where our mutual

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3160 Campbell Drive • Fairfax, Virginia 22031
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guest now has a bed, and we are slowly making progress on her case. We burned through three workers at Adult Protective Services in two weeks and discovered that wherever she was in the last six months, some nefarious person was stealing her Social Security payments. Our hope is to establish her in a safe senior community where her needs will be met and her Social Security will be legitimately spent for her care. She is too lost in her illness to be loving or grateful, but I cannot see her or think of her without seeing Jesus.

I did not expect to see and participate in radical discipleship that afternoon. I had every intention of going to my yoga class and having dinner at home with my family. Instead, Jesus showed up and reminded me that we meet him in the suffering people, the messy places, and uncomfortable experiences that intrude into everyday life. It might be with a guest here, in our wider community, or in our private lives, but all of us are going to experience someplace like a nursing home, the ER, or a psychiatric hospital, someplace where pain and mess and strong emotion rupture into our lives, no matter how orderly and sanitary we try to keep things. That is simply reality. It is the reality that Jesus knows firsthand. The reality that God in Christ chose to enter into. This is living, and this is discipleship.

-Deacon Deb Haynes



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