

The Fifth Sunday in Lent  
March 18, 2018  
John 13:14-15

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### **Outward Practice: Service**

Grace to you and peace from our loving God, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The spiritual practice under consideration today is service. On Wednesday we spoke about submission; today service. As the cross is the symbol of submission, so the towel is the sign of service. Perhaps you have noted that our Deacon Jeff Schacht has a number of towels bearing the colors of the liturgical seasons that he wears at his waist when he serves here at worship. The towel, as the symbol of service, is the preferred mark of deacons, who are consecrated to the ministry of “Word and Service.”

The ELCA (in various documents) says this about the ministry of deacons: “diaconal ministers offer a ministry of Word and service, sharing the hope of Christ, helping where there is need, and equipping others for healing and justice in the world...Diaconal ministers serve under call through agencies, institutions, synod councils, and traditional church programs as they build bridges between the church and the world.

“The ministry of the diaconate, that is of deacons also called ministers of Word and Service, is recognized by churches throughout history and around the world. The earliest deacon of the Bible was Stephen. The ELCA continues to seek to honor the significance of deacons serving at the intersection of church and world, bringing a sharper focus to the ways the church responds to the needs of people.”

So, yes, there is a consecrated group of folks who exercise this ministry on behalf of the Church. But the word “deacon” comes from the Greek work “diaconia” which simply means service. And all Christians are called to this way of being in the world, serving others and creation for the sake of God’s hopes for the world.

When Jesus gathered his disciples for the Last Supper, they were having trouble deciding who was the greatest. This was no new issue for them. “And an argument arose among them as to which of them was the greatest” (Luke 9:46). Gathered at the Passover feast, the disciples were keenly aware that someone needed to wash the others’ feet. The problem was that the only people who washed feet were those of lowest stature, and none of them wanted to lay claim to that place. So there they sat, feet caked with dirt. It was such a sore point that they were not even going to talk about it.

Then Jesus took a towel and a basin and redefined greatness. Having washed their feet, living out the meaning of servanthood before them, he called the disciples to the way of service: “If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also

ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you" (John 13:14-15). That appeal on the part of Jesus is intended for all of his disciples, in every time and every place. We are called to be servants of one another.

Service, as Jesus practiced it, is a humbling of oneself or a giving of oneself for the sake of others. And yet, even in this practice as in the others, there is great liberty. Service enables us to say "no" to the world's games of promotion and authority. It abolishes our need for a pecking order. Having had chickens for a number of years, that subject has more meaning for me. In the chicken pen there is no peace until it is clear who is the greatest and who is the least and who is at every rung in between. Indeed, you can identify the order often simply by where chickens choose to roost at night. In our coop, there are three levels; and the chickens lined themselves up according to their place and position. I found it somewhat weird as well as frustrating, especially because the chickens who were last in the order were treated terribly, sometimes pecked to within an inch of their lives. It was brutal and disturbing to me. I often found myself coming to the aid of that unfortunate at the bottom of the pecking order. Sometimes we would have to separate her from the others for a time.

The truth is that the same kind of thing can happen in a group of people. We may note it in where people choose to sit—not in church, of course! Or, who gives way when two people are talking at the same time? Who stands back and who steps forward when a job needs to be done—which, depending on the job, could indicate a higher or a lower place.

The point is not that we should do away with leadership or authority. Such things have their essential places in human society. The point is that Jesus completely redefines leadership and rearranges the lines of authority. He doesn't merely reverse the pecking order. He abolishes it. True authority is not about manipulation and control: "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:25-28). Spiritual authority is found not in position or title, but in a towel.

It is important to say more here. One does not take up the towel because it is required. This kind of service is not intended to be burdensome. It is not about choosing to act in service in order to demonstrate one's righteousness. It is not done for credit on some divine ledger. It is not done for the sake of recognition or reward or reciprocation or even results.

The spiritual practice of service is different. It comes from the heart. It is not contingent on moods or whims, giving simply and faithfully because there is a need. It is

tender and patient. It builds community. Indeed, joyous hidden service to others is an acted prayer of thanksgiving.

Several folks commented to me after the funeral for Charles Sweet last weekend that they felt they got to know him through the reflections and homily. They said that they had no idea how involved he was in the church or how much he did for others. This was due, in part, to his quiet nature. But I believe it also to be a testament that Charles was a practitioner of diaconia, a servant, in the best of ways. What he did was not for his personal glory. He did quietly, consistently, thoughtfully, and generously what he saw was needed and helpful through council, in gifts to MCUM and Lutheran Campus Ministry, in snacks for the office staff, in dedication to our church website and synod, and in many other ways.

The hiddenness of Charles' service gave witness to the humility that Jesus calls for in service. It comes from the heart and is not concerned with reward or recognition. "When you give alms," says our Lord, "don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing" (Matt. 6:3). Charles and his many small and large acts of serving will be greatly missed among us.

Service is often about the small things. Here's what Dietrich Bonhoeffer says about that:

"The second service that one should perform for another in a Christian community is that of active helpfulness. This means, initially, simple assistance in trifling, external matters. There is a multitude of these things wherever people live together. Nobody is too good for the meanest service. One who worries about the loss of time that such petty, outward acts of helpfulness entail is usually taking the importance of (their) own career too solemnly." (Like Together, p. 99)

The first, by the way, is "listening," according to Bonhoeffer—a simply, but profound, act of service for certain.

Servanthood also includes guarding the reputation of others, being charitable towards and thinking well of others. The apostle Paul taught us to "speak evil of no one" (Titus 3:2). And Luther spoke about the commandment about not bearing false witness in this way: "We should revere and love God so that we do not tell lies about our neighbor, betray him, slander him, or hurt his reputation, but defend him, speak well of him, and explain everything in the kindest way."

There is servanthood even in allowing oneself to be served by others. There is far too much talk about folks not wanting to be a burden to others. It is a blessing to serve, and it is blessed to be served. When Jesus began to wash the feet of the disciples, Peter refused. It sounded like a statement of humility; in reality it was an act of

veiled pride. Jesus' service was an affront to Peter's concept of authority. If he had been the master, he would never have washed feet!

It is an act of submission and service to allow others to serve us. Those who refuse to allow themselves to be the recipients of service are failing to submit to the divinely appointed calls of God for all Christians.

There is also service in common courtesy. Lamentably, courtesy is becoming something less than common in our day. Such is so much the case that in many cities, as in Bloomington, there is a need for measures like the "Save and Civil City Program." It has become all the more essential that we honor the rituals of human interaction that are affirming and thoughtful. We are "to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all others" (Titus 3:2).

Servanthood is expressed profoundly in the service of hospitality. Peter urges us to "Practice hospitality ungrudgingly to one another" (1 Peter 4:9). Paul does the same and even makes it one of the requirements for the office of bishop (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:8). In ancient times, hospitality to the stranger was in many ways an act of self- and communal-preservation. Otherwise, travel from one town to another or from one country to another would have been dangerous to the point of being nearly impossible. Today, it is simply a gracious act of welcoming that reflects the amazing grace of our Lord.

We serve also through our bearing of one another's burdens. "My yoke is easy," says our Lord, "and my burden is light" (Matt. 11:30). Burdens that are shared are lightened—in both senses of that word. They are made less heavy and easier to bear. And the light of care and compassion are shed upon them, illuminating whatever darkness there may be. This is often done simply with our being present to one another, but it may also include a sharing a words that give life and comfort.

Christ beckons us to the ministry of the towel. Such ministry, flowing from the heart, is life and joy and peace. Here's a prayer that may help. Begin each day by praying and I now ask you to pray along with me as I speak it: "Lord Jesus, as it would please you, bring me someone today whom I can serve." Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord, unto abundant life. Amen.

[Based on Richard J. Foster's "Celebration of Discipline"]