

IT'S YOUR TURN TO SERVE

(06/04/17)

Scripture Lessons: 1 Corinthians 12:4-11
John 13:1-15

“Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord – and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.” (John 13:12-15)

This is a special Sunday. Today is Pentecost—the birthday of the church. We also welcome Dawn into full membership. Dawn, we already celebrate your presence, your beautiful spirit, and the many gifts that you share so freely. Today is also communion Sunday, a time for us to be together as a community of faith, as a community of disciples and apostles gathered around the table with our Lord just as Jesus’ disciples broke bread with him during Holy Week.

The theme of gifts is a central theme of Pentecost. This morning I would like us to think about the unique gifts we have as individuals, as individual and unique incarnations of God’s creative spirit. These gifts are given to us that we might share them with the world. As we do this, we become co-creators with God.

In his letter to the church at Corinth, the apostle Paul tells his parishioners (and us) that because there are varieties of gifts, there are many different ways that we can help build up the church. He tells us there are many opportunities to serve the church and, through the church, to serve the world. He reminds us that our gifts are not to be hidden, as one would not place a candle under a bushel basket, but are intended to shine forth. They are not intended for our personal gain; they are entrusted to us “for the common good.” This is a very important point.

Dawn, in this passage Paul is speaking to you. You have special gifts and talents. When you bring your gifts and talents to this church, you build up not only this church but also the mystical body of Christ, for we are one with each other in Christ. In Romans 12, Paul tells us,

For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members of one another.

What a beautiful statement! Not all members of our church have the same gifts, but we offer what we have and who we are. We do so knowing that we are one in Christ and we are one

with each other. This is what it means to be a member of a Christian community, especially a Christian community like our church.

We in this church celebrate the richness of our diversity and our willingness to share our gifts. Each of us has something special to give to our church and to one another. In fact, a central part of our spiritual journey is discovering what we have to offer to the great stream of life. What better place to discover this and to live it out than in communion with the church that called us to this journey and nurtured our spiritual growth throughout our lives?

The gospel reading from the 13th chapter of John, which is amplified by Paul's letter to the Corinthians, provides us with the foundation of not only our membership in the church, but also of every aspect, every part of our life. It confronts us, challenges us, and invites us to view not only church membership but also life itself as an opportunity to serve.

As we heard this past Lenten season, Jesus and his disciples enter Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. On the evening before Passover begins, they sit at table in the Upper Room. Before they eat, Jesus does something that is startling, confusing, and disturbing to his disciples. He gets down on his hands and knees and washes their feet.

A host would never stoop to wash the feet of his guests. Servants would have been responsible for discharging that expression of hospitality. The disciples know Jesus as their rabbi. They know him as the Son of Man and also as the Son of God. They have glimpsed both his humanity and his divinity. They have heard his teaching and witnessed his healing miracles. They understand that he is the teacher and they are the students; he is the master and they are the disciples.

Peter grasps the incongruity of Jesus' action, and he feels uncomfortable with it. He knows that as a disciple he should wash Jesus' feet, not the other way around. When Jesus insists on performing this service, Peter expresses his faith in Jesus' power to cleanse his entire being when he asks Jesus to wash not only his feet but also his hands, his head, and his heart.

Jesus probably smiled at Peter's request. This is not what he has in mind as he washes his disciples' feet. The teaching, the message he is trying to convey is not about cleansing, about taking away sin and making someone pure. It is about service.

When Jesus has finished washing his disciples' feet, he addresses his little band of confused followers. He says,

Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord -- and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example: that you also should do as I have done to you.

Some religious traditions or churches observe the ritual of the washing of the feet on Maundy Thursday. On Maundy Thursday last year Pope Francis washed the feet of eleven Muslim immigrants; this year he washed and kissed the feet of twelve prison inmates. This was more than a simple honoring of our Muslim brothers and sisters and those who are outcasts, those on the margins of our society; it was also a call to us to follow his example. If we followed Pope Francis' example in our global commitment to serving those who are hungry and thirsty, those who have been displaced from their homes and their homelands, even those who are in prison for having committed crimes, we might have less crime, less wars, and less terrorism.

On this special Sunday as we think about what it means to be the church of Jesus Christ, I would like us to participate in a ritual. I would like us to wash each other's hands as a symbol of our ministry to each other. Beginning with our new member and her grandchildren, I invite everyone who would like to participate in this ceremony to come forward and line up on the right hand side of the sanctuary, the lectern side of the table.

When it is your turn, please stand in front of the table and hold your hands over the basin. I will pour a small amount of water over your hands and say to you, "May the presence of Christ inspire you to service through the sharing of your gifts." I will wipe Dawn's hands; she will wipe her granddaughters' hands, and then everyone will wipe the hands of the next person in line. Take your time wiping the hands of the person who stands before you. I suspect it will be as unusual an experience for most of us as it was for the disciples in the upper room.

At this time, I invite everyone to come forward to participate in the ritual washing of hands, declaring that we are not only servants of our Lord but also servants of each other.

(The washing of the hands will take place on the main floor of the sanctuary.)

Dawn, as you join with our church this day, I would like you to remember this lesson. We are called to a life of service in and through this church. We all have gifts and talents that we can share. As symbolized in washing his disciples' feet, Jesus tells us that if we are to be his followers, we must become servants. This is what Christians do, or at least it is what Christians are called to do. This is what has made this church not only special but great throughout its 152-

year history. Somehow, despite the diversity of our religious beliefs, backgrounds, and even personalities, we have grasped the importance of service.

If we only do one thing in this church and do it well, this is what I would like us to do. I would like us to serve each other, our community, and the world. As we do this, we serve our Lord. When we commit ourselves to a life, to a ministry of service, we are following our Lord's example and we are becoming the disciples and apostles that he calls us to be.

Dawn, I welcome you into full fellowship with our church. I trust that in the days to come you will discover, just as we have discovered, many opportunities to serve.

Now let us be with our Lord and with each other as we share in the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

*A communion meditation shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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