

“It is Our Turn”

The Rev. S. Shane Nanney – March 28, 2024
1 Corinthians 11:23-26, John 13:1-17, 31-35

Servanthood is not popular to preach these days because we live in a society where most people are:

Looking for what others can do for them.

Not what they can do for others.

We live in an egocentric age where the "what's in it for me" mentality has permeated every aspect of our society and sadly has infiltrated the lives of today's professed Christians. I think most of us would agree that we live in a society where we want someone to do things for us.

This reminds me of two friends that met on the street. One looked sad and almost on the verge of tears. The other man said, "Hey my friend, how come you look like the whole world has caved in on you?" The sad fellow said, "Let me tell you why I am so sad. Three weeks ago, an uncle died and left me 50 thousand dollars." "That's great!" "Two weeks ago, a cousin I never knew died and left me 95 thousand, tax-free to boot." "Wow! That's really great!" "And last week my grandfather passed away. I inherited almost a million dollars." "So why are you so sad?" "This week - nothing!!!"

Again, there are people who live their life thinking about what others can give them, not what they can give to others. They want to be served; not serve!

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said, "The Church is the Church **ONLY** when it exists for others...not dominating but helping and serving. It must exemplify to others what it means to live for Christ, to exist for others." This is the essence of service - existing for others, just as Christ did for us.

This passage from John is a vivid representation of the humility and servitude of Jesus, who stooped down to wash the feet of His disciples. This act was not merely a physical one, but a symbolic gesture that encapsulates the essence of His ministry and the life He calls us to lead.

Why foot washing? In the culture of the time, foot washing was a task reserved for the lowest of servants. It was a menial, dirty job, often performed upon entering a house as a sign of hospitality. Yet, here was Jesus, performing this

task for His disciples. This act was a powerful demonstration of the humility that characterized Jesus' life and ministry. He was not a leader who lorded over His followers, but one who served them, even to the point of performing the humblest of tasks.

In a world that often equates leadership with dominance and control, Jesus presents a different model - one of servitude, humility, and love. He did not seek to be served, but to serve, and He calls us to do the same. This is a radical call, one that goes against the grain of our human nature and societal norms. Yet, it is the call of the Gospel, the call of Christ, to live a life of service.

We must remember that He served willingly, without coercion or reluctance. He served joyfully, without grumbling or complaining. He served selflessly, without expecting anything in return. This is the attitude of service that Jesus exemplifies, and this is the attitude of service that He calls us to emulate.

Shane Claiborne, who spent a summer in the slums of Calcutta with Mother Teresa, wrote the following about one of his experiences:

People often ask me what Mother Teresa was like. Did she glow in the dark or have a halo? She was short, wrinkled, and precious, maybe even a little ornery--like a beautiful, wise old granny.

But there is one thing I will never forget—her feet were deformed. Each morning during Mass, I would stare at those feet. I wondered if Mother Teresa had leprosy. But I wasn't going to ask, of course.

One day a sister asked us, "Have you noticed Mother's feet?" We nodded, curious. She said, "Her feet are deformed because we get just enough donated shoes for everyone, and Mother does not want anyone to get stuck with the worst pair, so she digs through and finds those. Years of wearing bad shoes have deformed her feet."

That is the kind of love that places our neighbors' needs above our own.

The call to serve is a call that echoes from the heart of the Gospel, reverberating through the ages, and resonating in the heart of every believer. It is a call that is deeply rooted in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.

Jesus' question to His disciples: "do you understand what I have done for you?" This is also a question posed to us. Do we understand the magnitude of Jesus' act of service? Do we comprehend the depth of His humility and love? If we do,

then we are called to emulate His example. We are called to serve others, not out of obligation, but out of love and humility.

The British royal website says, “The tradition of the Sovereign giving money to the poor dates from the 13th century. The Sovereign also used to give food and clothing (later changed to a gift of money), and even washed the recipients’ feet — this varied from Sovereign to Sovereign, the last Monarch to do so was James II.”

It must have been quite a site to see royalty in the humbling posture of foot washing. It is not surprising that this element of the ceremony was dropped several hundred years ago. Although now the King would not risk much except his dignity by washing the feet of the poor, in more politically charged times even the smallest display of meekness and humility could place one’s political power in jeopardy. It is unfortunate that we sometimes see meekness as weakness and consider it a disposable quality, but we seldom see power as disposable. The Bible says, “Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience” (Colossians 3:12). This is to be a character quality of Christians because we follow the model of Christ. Jesus said, “I am gentle and humble in heart.”

The blessings of serving are manifold and profound. They are not always material or tangible, but they are always spiritual and transformative. When we serve others, we are not only fulfilling the command of our Lord, but we are also aligning ourselves with His very nature - a nature of selfless love and sacrificial giving.

Jesus tells His disciples, “Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.” The blessing comes not from the mere knowledge of the act of service, but from the doing, the action, the implementation of service in our daily lives. This is a clear indication that the blessings of serving are not passive, but active. They require our participation and engagement.

Brother Lawrence, a 17th century lay brother and a good cook, spent most of his years in a monastery as a cook. He did not have the education necessary to become a cleric and his mundane duties included cooking meals, running errands and scrubbing pots, anything but changing the world.

Despite his lowly position, Brother Lawrence attracted a huge following no one could explain. His experiences and advice were later compiled in a small book, "Practicing the Presence of God." People often wondered how he could stand

the chores and his superiors, but he said: "Nor is it needful that we should have great things to do...We can do little things for God; I turn the cake that is frying on the pan for love of him, and that done, if there is nothing else to call me, I prostrate myself in worship before him, who has given me grace to work; afterwards I rise happier than a king. It is enough for me to pick up but a straw from the ground for the love of God."

Martin Luther King Jr. said it well: "Everybody can be great, because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve, you don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve, you don't have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve, you don't have to know Einstein's Theory of Relativity to serve, you don't have to know the Second Theory of Thermodynamics and Physics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love."

When we serve others, we are putting our faith into action. We are living out the commandments of Christ, and in doing so, our faith becomes more than just a belief system - it becomes a lifestyle.

There is a great satisfaction that comes from knowing that you have made a difference in someone else's life, no matter how small. This joy is not dependent on the recognition or gratitude of those we serve. It is a joy that springs from the knowledge that we are doing the will of our Father in heaven.

So, let's go out into our world, into our communities, into our homes, and serve as Jesus served. Let's wash the feet of our brothers and sisters, by putting their needs before our own, by loving them as Christ loves us. And as we do so, let's remember Jesus' promise that we will be blessed if we do these things. Amen.