

Maundy Thursday
Wicker Park Lutheran Church
Rev. Jason S. Glombicki

March 24, 2016

Maundy Thursday. It's a weird title. Often people think I'm saying "Monday Thursday," like I'm rearranging the order of the week. Maundy means "commandment." The commandment we focus on today is what I read from John: to "love one another" (John 13:34), and we look to Jesus' act of washing the disciples' feet as an example of how to lovingly serve.

In our contemporary society the "service industry" has bloomed like a spring flower. There are more service companies on the Fortune 500 list than in previous decades. But, what is service? How do we love one another in service?

Sandra Schneiders, a professor of New Testament and Christian Spirituality, sees three main models of service:

First, there's "service as obligation," where the one serving is bound in a relationship of social power to serve a privileged person. This type of service is when a subject serves the ruler, or the poor serves the wealthy, or when a waiter serves the customer. This is a primary form of service that we see in our society.

The second form is the "existential model," where the server acts on behalf of the served because of a perceived need that the server has the ability to meet. Examples include, a mother - child relationship, a teacher and a student, doctor and patient, or those with food and those without. This service is based on inequality, and often feeds our egos

and builds our careers. This type of service is what we often find in churches and non-profit agencies.

The third model is different from all the rest. The third is of friendship. Friendships are unlike any other relationship we have. Friendships have the power to subvert obligation, and friendships can go against privilege. At its best, friendships can build bridges over different ideologies, religions, and social conflicts. Friendship, Schneiders argues, is “the one human relationship based on equality.”¹

Today’s gospel reading *is* about friendship. The model of loving service that Jesus embodies with his disciples is one of equality. While Jesus is their teacher and Lord, he does not demand a disciple to wash his feet. Jesus does not make his disciples serve him in an obligatory way. Jesus does not wash their feet to build his ego or make them dependent on him. After all, Jesus washes the feet of *all* the disciples – including the one who will turn him over to be arrested, including those who will deny him, and including those who will stand by and watch him take his last breath. Jesus treats each of them with respect, dignity, and equity. Jesus treats them as friends.

On this night, when we are called into loving service, I wonder: how might we serve without obligation or ego? How can we serve together as friends?

In Robert Lupton’s book *Toxic Charity* he explores how churches and charities actually hurt those they help. Lupton says “our motives are good, but we have neglected to conduct care-full due diligence to determine emotional, economic, and cultural outcomes on the receiving end of our charity... as compassionate people, we have been evaluating

¹ Sandra M. Schneiders, *Written That You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*, 1999.

our charity by the rewards we receive through service, rather than the benefits received by the served.”

Lupton goes on to explore compassionate service as relational. He calls us to listen to those we seek to help; to empower people; to subordinate self-interests; to never do for people what they can do for themselves; and to limit one-way giving. You see, at the heart of loving service is actually friendship. Loving service acknowledges humanity, Loving service learns from another, and loving service is built on relationships. To serve takes commitment and time. To serve is a way of living and not a one-time event.

And it’s no wonder that Jesus serves around a table of his friends. We gather at tables with friends to share a meal, to connect, and to be equals. As a congregation we gather around this table where each person receives the gifts of God equally – gifts of bread and wine, and gifts of grace and love. At this table it’s an on-going relationship with our God whose nature is to serve and love. And on this night we also gather at the washbasin to be equals. For you are invited to first have your feet washed and then to wash another’s feet. Here we give *and* receive. Here we model loving service. It is here that we gather as friends. It is here that God shows *us* loving service. Amen.