

MAUNDY THURSDAY C

April 1, 2010

Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ

Acts 11:1—8

Psalm 148

Revelation 21:1—6

John 13:31—35

I have a question for you this evening...

Which is more difficult? To serve, or to be served?

Don't answer yourself too quickly. Stop to think about it.

We might think that serving would be more difficult. After all, the call to serve doesn't always come at a time that's convenient for us. We're busy people; we've got lots to do. The call to serve might sometime mean that we have to set aside what's important to us, in order to help our neighbor in ways that are important to them.

Serving others can also be physically demanding work. For instance, we might be asked to help someone with household chores that they can no longer do for themselves. Or, there is even harder work, such as the request that is currently before our congregation – helping to build a house for Habitat for Humanity. Many of the jobs at the Habitat site, such as pouring the foundation or hanging drywall, are hard work.

Perhaps the most difficult form of service, however, can be to help those who somehow seem unlovable. People who are obstinate or ill-mannered, and yet are in need of our Christian care and compassion.

Despite the good feelings we can sometimes get when serving others, this can often seem like the more difficult path.

And yet, being served presents us with its own set of difficulties.

Being served can also make us feel good. We feel special when others are doing things for us.

But being served can also make us feel uncomfortable.

If we suffer illness or injury, we might have to rely on someone else to do for us the things we previously would have done for ourselves. Perhaps one of the worst feelings is becoming totally dependent on another person. This leads to feelings of helplessness. And, we feel guilty imposing on others.

Another example: Think about the last time you received a gift from someone. What was your first response? I hope it was to say thank you! But then, often, we begin to think of what gift we can give the gift-giver in return, some attempt to balance the equation so that we don't feel indebted. The same thing goes for when someone does us a favor. It makes us feel like we owe them something in return.

Being served is not necessarily so easy.

I think that being a gracious recipient is especially hard for us Christians. We're so trained that the greater path is in service to others that we might find it hard to simply sit still and allow ourselves to be served, even when our being served

means that someone else has an opportunity to serve.

About ten years ago a dear friend of mine sponsored me into a weekend-long Via de Cristo retreat. *Via de Cristo* means “the way of Christ.” Via de Cristo is the Lutheran expression of the Cursillo movement, begun in 1944 by a group of Spanish laypersons. *Cursillo* literally means “a short course in Christianity,” and is intended to train laypeople as leaders in preparation for sending them back out into the world in service. Since 1944 the Cursillo movement has spread all over the world and into many Christian denominations.

While I highly encourage anyone and everyone to attend a Via de Cristo weekend, I'll be honest with you: My retreat weekend was excruciatingly painful for me. You see, the primary responsibility of retreat team members – all laypeople who themselves have already completed their first retreat – is to serve. The primary responsibility of those making their first retreat is to be served, to learn to be a gracious recipient.

Our training in learning to be a gracious recipient at the Via de Cristo weekend required that we allow the team members to do everything for us. Forgot a book in your room? Someone will fetch it for you. Need something to drink? No problem, someone will bring it in a jiff. Finished your dinner? Stay seated – someone will be along to whisk your dirty dishes off to the kitchen. No helping in

the kitchen, no making your own bed, no cleaning up the bathroom... All of this is done by those who are living out their call to serve by being retreat team members.

For some people – many people, I suspect – this sounds like a dream weekend. For me, it was torture. It was torture because I'd never learned how to graciously receive, with a simple “Thank you” in return.

What I learned on that weekend is that being a gracious recipient goes to the very core of who we are as Christians. It's the lesson that Peter learned from Jesus that evening when Jesus knelt to wash Peter's feet. That in the economy of God's kingdom, Jesus came not to be served, but to serve.

Before we can fully embrace the complexity and vastness of God's actions toward us in Jesus Christ, we first have to learn to be a gracious recipient. Our task tonight, as those who claim to follow the *via de Cristo*, the way of Christ? It is to open our hands, and graciously receive the gift that God has given. To learn that in order to be a blessing to others through our service, we must first be blessed, by being served by Jesus our Lord, who humbled himself in the way of a servant so that he might become Savior of all.

Amen.

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