

Sermon for January 23, 2005

Called to serve

John 13:15-17

The text

[15] For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. [16] Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. [17] If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.

The pastor was running late. He had to shovel out his driveway before he could leave for church. He knew that the parking lot would be plowed but he probably would have to shovel off the walkway to the church door. He was surprised when he arrived to find the sidewalk already cleared of snow. He was even more surprised when he found the church door unlocked.

“Hello!” he called out!

“Down here pastor,” came the familiar voice of Doug Roberts.

When he got downstairs he found Doug rearranging the chairs. He had already cleaned up the coffee cups and swept the floor following last night’s meeting.

“You didn’t have to do that, Doug,” said the pastor. “You know the caretaker comes in tomorrow, and would tidy up. By the way, thanks for shovelling the walk too.”

“Yeah, I know,” replied Doug. “But I don’t mind. It’s no trouble at all.”

All congregations have one or more Doug Roberts among their members. They’re the ones who have an understanding of being a servant. The Dougs of this world are the ones who will volunteer to do almost anything around the church. Many times they just do it without being asked. They have caught the idea in Jesus’ words to his disciples, “...I have given you an example...” And by his example our Lord calls us to humble service in His church. His example is His own humble service for us.

He “came not to be served but to serve,...” and he advised his disciples that “whoever would be great among you must be your servant” (Mt.20:26, 28). To which we can add the parting phrase of our text: “If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them” (Jn.3:17). For years now we have thought about how Jesus went about his Father’s business. What a shock to learn that Jesus means we too should be about our Father’s business! He just doesn’t want us to think about his humble service for us but to emulate him. He wants us to be “Christ-like” not just in a few things but in all things.

How have we done? I suppose some have done better than others. But we all “have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” Often we need to repent and throw ourselves on the mercy of God. Even our repentance carries with it responsibilities. Repentance is a turning away from going in one direction to heading in a completely different direction. A different orientation results in a Peter who wants his whole self washed, not just his feet. Our repentance may

well mean that we ask our Lord to help us be of service to others with our whole life.

Consider, if you will, Jesus on the night of the Last Supper. When no one else was about to do the foot washing he volunteered. He stripped down, took the basin and towel, and washed his disciples' feet. He took on the servant's role. And he explained it by telling them: "I have given you an example..."

Thousands of people in our congregations have taken Jesus seriously. They stand with towel and basin in hand just waiting for some dirty feet to come along. Not all of them are professional servant material. Not all of them can be pastors or teachers. Most of them will remain servants within their own congregations. They will do what they do washing the feet that come their way. They will do it humbly and gladly for the love of God and following Jesus' example of service.

For even today Jesus the servant comes among us. We are washed clean of our sin in his blood, the blood of the Lamb, slain for us. He who is the Son of God wore a crown of thorns so that we the sinners could wear the crown of life. He who hung nakedly on the cross has covered us with a robe of righteousness. He who died rose so that might we rise to newness of life. Our service is not a duty in expectation of reward but a response to the Gospel. If we "have to" it's not service; it's slavery. It is not being said to you today that you shoulda, woulda, gotta, oughta be a servant. To be of service is the way of the cross. His example of service to us is much more than example. This Christ who through Baptism has raised us to new life is now in us doing that which we cannot.

Through Word and Sacrament our service is renewed each day through the power of the Servant Christ. So our servanthood means repentance. Our servanthood means understanding that if we would be great we are to be servants. The servants are here among us. In the past years the *RSVP* program of Lutheran Church–Canada has set its sights on identifying those in our congregations who might be qualified for full time church work vocations. Not all of you are cut out for full time church work. However, there are those among you who are cut out to be servants here in this place. Many times the servant doesn't recognize his own gifts while others do. This year we are asking that you take a look around our congregation and think about those who might be chosen for service here. Their service may be considered for Church Council, for teaching Sunday school or Bible class, or being a counsellor for our youth group. One serves where one can, doing what one does. The service of the Mother Therasas of this world are of no more service to the kingdom than he who shovels the walk.

May this day be for us a time of repentance and renewal for our service. We began with a reminder of our Baptism. We continued at the foot of the cross repenting of our sin. We heard in the Word of God the comfort and admonition only he can give. In the Holy Communion we will receive his body and blood of the forgiveness of our sins and the strengthening of our faith. Strength to once again pick up the basin and towel with Jesus and follow his example in service. May God bless your service this day and always.