
A Servant's Heart

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The Cathedral of St. Philip
April 9, 2009: Maundy Thursday
Exodus 12:1-4, 11-14
Psalm 116:1, 10-17
1 Corinthians 11:23-26
Gospel: John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Many years ago, I was attending a graduation ceremony at Delta Airlines Inc. There was nothing unusual about the ceremony. As a training instructor, a part of the responsibility was to participate in the recognition of the accomplishments of these women and a few men each time that a class graduated. Those who had met and completed the requirements were transitioning into a new place which would change their lives" more than most of them realized.

These graduating women and men had demonstrated their abilities and capabilities and were now certified by the Federal Aviation Administration and Delta. They were trained and able to perform in any emergency situation on any type of aircraft including evacuating an aircraft in any body of water.

Their purpose was and is certainly more than what meets the eye. In the midst of the droning routine, the ultimate goal was and is still today to keep everyone mindful of their safety and the safety of others. This goal is the ultimate goal of the cockpit and cabin crew" to arrive safely and without incident.

Along, the way, one was taught the nuances of "how to serve meals," (they had meals back then) and the differences between chateaubriand, beef brisket and filet mignon. Skills were tested in adjusting to presenting an image. The graduates had incorporated how to deal with all manner of human kind including those who were afraid of flying as well as those agitating passengers.

The safety training then, and even more so now, is a plethora of processes that one never desired to use unless absolutely necessary.

The graduation ceremony had the usual variety of people for that environment: the senior executives, the administrative staff, the graduates, their family members and friends and, of course, a speaker.

The speaker for this particular class was a preacher. His message to the graduates focused on the future roads that these fine folk were about to be placed upon.

I was there as an instructor, as I indicated earlier, along with seven other instructors to ensure that they, the graduates, were ready to spend unlimited hours over the time of a career, being inside of an aircraft; a metal tube. Regardless of their dreams and aspirations, personally, this was the beginning point.

Being with the people, the traveling public. Traveling from point A to point B and then doing the same thing all over again.

Talking and listening, comforting and leaving alone. Serving and caring for another. Always mindful of the training which is reassessed each year by several governing bodies.

The preacher, this man of God, said to this graduating class the following: you will be meeting and serving people from all walks of life and it will be important to remember that you are a part of their journey whether they see the need for your presence or not.

Words of encouragement were given along with tools of wisdom.

He said, when you are ignored, do not feel diminished. Remember why you are there for a part of their journey.

To demonstrate his point further he said, "You will serve people and will be with people who are sometimes difficult to serve. There will be those who will complain endlessly to you because your face will be the face of the company. They will express themselves, especially if their experiences have been good. They see you."

The traveling public is not always pleased. And today I would add and rightfully so.

There will be those who will use you and think less of you just because of their position in life. And he concluded his speech by saying these words:

Always remember what Jesus taught his disciples. Remember the commandment that he gave to them at the last supper. "'To love one another as I love you.' In the midst of your routine, remember the brightness of God's love for you. It will enable you to serve with a flowing spirit of hospitality and graciousness that will be appropriate most of the time and necessary in most situations. Do this with professionalism, with sincerity, and most of all, interest in humanity. This will enable you to care for and about those who probably will not care about you."

"Remember to love those that don't and who can't for various and sundry reasons, love you. Remember," he said.

On this Maundy Thursday, we are reminded of those same disciples that this preacher, this man of God over 30 years ago talked about in a secular setting.

Initially, I choose to be offended at this man's words. Serving people who may not see you as equal to them? I concluded that since I was not a member of this class that he could not have been talking to me.

Over the years, I came to realize that he was speaking of a servant's heart. A servant's heart.

When Jesus said to the disciples in the gospel of John, "For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you." Servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them".

Jesus knew that his disciples did not understand what was about to take place. They were there with him reclining at the table, The Last Supper, and they considered it to be a routine meal, yet again.

They believed that they were privileged because they were with The Son of God, the messiah and he was with them.

After this meal Jesus prepared to give to them a gift. The gift of ultimate humility. The gift was of him washing their feet. God's heart was filled with love for those who did not fully understand yet he did not leave them or forsake them. What he did was prepare them to serve others.

Simon Peter wanted to be with Jesus and to serve as he had been taught, but he did not quite "get it." He did not see the need for Jesus to wash his feet. He even said, "'You will never wash my feet.'" He later understood that the washing of his feet was symbolic of how Jesus mandated his heart to be. Love one another as I have loved you. Love thy neighbor as thyself. Serve others. When Simon Peter began to understand what was intended by the words of Jesus, of God, it became clear that the servant indeed is not greater than the master.

We find that as we struggle to keep the commandment to love one another, we reflect on how the strange purposes of God, love and betrayal, glory and denial, go so closely together.

When the preacher at this graduation said servants are not greater than their master, I didn't quite hear the word in the way that it was intended. Using words like servants and master, in the early 1970's gave me the opportunity to turn a deaf ear to the words of God being spoken. I wasn't a graduate. He could not have been speaking to me.

Having a servant's heart helps one to see things a little differently, especially from a world view. Serving one another moves us to a place that enables us to see a little clearer. Having a servant's heart opens us to possibilities in living and being that changes our perspective.

Look at Peter and the others. They were made clean because they began to act on the words that Jesus spoke to them. Their actions lead to them washing one another's feet. Their seeing and hearing the words "love one another as I have loved you" moved them to begin to see the face of God in one another. Their actions moved them to leave for future generations a model of remembering the meaning of sharing a meal with one's neighbor.

Breaking bread together and seeking the face of God in people who may not look like you or me brings and builds community. Seeking the face of God really has nothing to do with how we look on the outside. It has everything to do with how we attend to our hearts. The condition of the heart makes the difference. This we know and this we live.

Simon Peter and the others got it. Even though Jesus was betrayed, he still taught the message of love. To accomplish the goal of loving and glorifying God begins with remembering to serve as the disciples did.

Most of the folks who were in that graduating class have retired now. Some are still flying. A few have gone to be with our heavenly father. Those who are still flying travel to the most desired destinations, simply because of their seniority. But those who heard that preacher's message on that graduation day, still see the face of humanness in another and they are serving for the common good. They learned to serve and to give. How do I know this?

I talked with five from another graduating class a couple of weeks ago. All of them have retired, however, one of the five is still living and caring and seeking to serve others. She has a servant's heart.

I said to her, "Jeannie, why did you go back to flying?"

She said, "Carolynne, I miss the comradeship, I miss the fellowship, I miss being with people."

I said to her, "But Jeannie, the work is so hard." She said, "It is but, I am at peace in serving and being with people."

It really does not matter where we serve you and me. It isn't extremely important to God as to what we do. The commandment at the last supper was to love one another. The same is true today as it was over 2,000 years ago. Our heart for others and God's heart to us are servant's hearts.

Jesus had a servant's heart. He died to fulfill God's will. He took it a step further. He died for you and for me. That was the ultimate sacrifice. His dying was not the end of the story. For now, remember what he did for the good of all who listen to his voice.

God's grace is sufficient for all of human kind.
Amen.

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