

Several years ago a friend of mine from Seminary interviewed for a youth director's position at a local church. Afterwards as she was discussing the interview with a group of her classmates, including myself, she mentioned that out of all the questions that she was asked, there was one question that stood out. Someone from the congregation had asked her, "If you could sum up the entire Bible using only one word, what would that word be?" Before she told us her response, our friend invited us to offer up our own answers.

After a few minutes of deliberation, everyone began to spout off ideas. One guy, a senior, said, "It is because of God's gracious gift of his son Jesus that we have been saved and we also encounter grace throughout the Bible! I'm going to have to go with Grace!" Another replied, "As we read scripture we encounter the Law, which accuses us of our sins and the Gospel, which gives us hope that through Christ our sins are forgiven. My answer is Hope!" A first year student declared, "Forgiveness! Our sins are taken away because God has forgiven us on account of what Jesus has done for us on the cross!" And I proclaimed, "I guess I'm going to have to respond with the word Faith, because in the Old Testament God's people are ultimately called to put their trust in him and in the New Testament we are called to have faith in Jesus. It is also through God's Spirit and God's Word that we come to faith in Jesus, so therefore scripture can be summed up as faith."

Once all of us had finished offering our suggestions, our friend told us her answer. She said that she had responded to the question with the first thing that came into her head, which was the word Love! She went on to tell us that whenever she reads the Bible she can't help but think about how much God loves and cares for us.

Think about it, from the moment we read the very first book, and the very first chapter, we discover that God created us out of love, and it is through love that God provides for those he creates. As we continue to read more we learn that it is God's affection for his chosen people the Israelites that causes him to save them from their Egyptian captivity. It is with love that he presents them with the Ten Commandments. And even when the people he had created and saved began to turn their backs on him by worshipping other gods, he cares for them by sending them prophets like Daniel, Isaiah, and Ezekiel, to proclaim a message of repentance in hopes of turning them back to Him.

Finally, it is his unconditional love for his people that leads God to send His only son into our world so that humanity could witness first hand just how much He cares for them. Our God was willing to become human, willing to heal the sick, willing to eat with the undesirables of society, willing to teach and preach, and as we observe in our Gospel lesson for today, he was even willing to take on the role of the lowliest of servants by washing the feet of his disciples.

In the Gospel of John we observe Mary performing a similar action with an expensive bottle of perfume and we learn that it was rather rare for a servant to wash the feet of others. Most people in those days washed and anointed their own feet, although as a special mark of affection, a host or hostess might wash a guest's feet, but it was not a standard operating procedure in most homes. In fact, Jewish servants wouldn't even think of doing such a thing, though some Gentile slaves might have done it.

Imagine then the look of shock and surprise on the faces of the disciples as their Master rose from the dinner table, lay aside his outer garments, wrapped a towel around his

waist, took a basin of water, and washed their feet. It was a menial task, and yet Jesus did it to show them just how much he loved them. Of course as we continue on in our narrative we discover that he had other reasons for doing this.

After supper, in Luke's account of this story, the disciples get into yet another argument over which of them is the greatest. So how does Jesus respond to their selfish attitudes? He provides them with an unforgettable lesson in humility and love, and by his actions rebukes them for their selfishness and pride. The more we think about this scene the more profound it becomes. Through his act of washing their feet Jesus is trying to help his students to understand that they need to learn to love each other and act on that love. Jesus proclaims to them, "If I your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet!" The disciples are going to have to learn to care for each other now more than ever, because they are going to need an enormous amount of love and support before the evening was over.

We today, just like the disciples that night, also need this lesson in humility. The Church is filled with a worldly spirit of competition and criticism...as believers compete with one another to see who is the greatest. Instead of loving one another and supporting each other, there are many who only seem to care about themselves. Some do whatever it takes to get ahead in the workplace even at the cost of hurting others. Others may do practically anything and everything in school to be at the top of his or her class, even if it means cheating on an exam or turning in work that doesn't belong to them. Some congregations might feel the need to compete with others churches for members rather than working together ecumenically, even though there are plenty of people to go around.

Still others may desire to have as much money as possible; even it causes them to avoid helping those who are less fortunate, or to give less to the church. In many ways we are growing in knowledge, but not in grace. Someone once said that “Humility is the only soil in which the graces root. The lack of humility and love is a sufficient explanation of every defect and failure.”

The problem with competition is that it can cause us to be selfish and self-serving. In fact, the more we focus on ourselves, and what we want and desire, the harder it is for us to live in accordance with what God desires for us. This self-centered attitude that many people these days possess is capable of hindering faith, and yet the opposite of this is also true.

The more we serve God, by loving each other as Jesus calls his disciples and us to do in our Gospel story for today, then the more our loving service toward one another can lead to an increase in our faith. Just look at what happens with Peter when he doesn't understand what his Lord is doing! He selfishly and impulsively tries to tell Jesus what to do. “You will never wash my feet!” It isn't until he discovers that refusing the Lord meant losing the Lord's fellowship that he then goes in the opposite direction and asked for a complete bath!

We can learn an important lesson from Peter: don't question the Lord's will or work, and don't try to change it. God knows what he is doing. Peter had a difficult time accepting Christ's ministry to him because of his self-serving attitude. One could even argue that Peter desired to be greater than the other disciples when he boasts that he will follow Jesus even to death. However, Jesus declares, “Where I am going, you cannot come!”

Peter disregarded Christ's warning, decided to follow him, and incidentally ended up getting into some trouble as he denied his teacher and friend three times. If only he had

learned more from Christ's earlier lesson on humility and love when his Master had taken on the role of a servant and washed his feet.

Jesus was the Sovereign, yet he took the place of a slave. He had all things in his hands, yet he picked up a towel. He was Lord and Master, yet he served his followers. It has well been said that humility is not thinking of yourself at all. True humility grows out of our relationship with the Father. If our desire is to know and do the Father's will, so that we might glorify his name, then we will experience the joy of following Christ's example by serving others.

The new and final Commandment that Jesus gives his disciples before he is taken to the cross is that they are to love one another just as Christ had loved them. In fact, we call today Maundy Thursday because it comes from an old Latin name for the day, "Dies Mandatum," which means "the day of the new commandment." The disciples would certainly need to follow this new command to love one another in the hours that followed, when their Master would be taken from them, and when their brave spokesman, Peter, would fail Him and them. In fact all of them would fail, and the only thing that would bring them together would be their love for Christ and for each other. Ok.....So what might a selfless love for others look like? In closing, I'd like to share a brief story with you that demonstrates this well.

A nurse took the tired, anxious serviceman to the bedside.

"Your son is here," she said to the old man. She had to repeat the words several times before the patient's eyes opened.

Heavily sedated because of the pain of his heart attack, he dimly saw the

young uniformed Marine standing outside the oxygen tent. He reached out his hand. The Marine wrapped his toughened fingers around the old man's limp ones, squeezing a message of love and encouragement.

The nurse brought a chair so that the Marine could sit beside the bed. All through the night the young Marine sat there in the poorly lighted ward, holding the old man's hand and offering him words of love and strength.

Occasionally, the nurse suggested that the Marine move away and rest awhile. He refused.

Whenever the nurse came into the ward, the Marine was oblivious of her and of the night noises of the hospital - the clanking of the oxygen tank, the laughter of the night staff members exchanging greetings, the cries and moans of the other patients.

Now and then she heard him say a few gentle words. The dying man said nothing, he simply held tightly to his son all through the night.

Along towards dawn, the old man died. The Marine released the now lifeless hand he had been holding and went to tell the nurse. While she did what she had to do, he waited. Finally, she returned. She started to offer words of sympathy, but the Marine interrupted her. "Who was that man?" he asked.

The nurse was startled. "He was your father," she answered.

"No, he wasn't," the Marine replied. "I never saw him before in my life."

"Then why didn't you say something when I took you to him?"

"I knew right away that there had been a mistake, but I also knew he needed his son, and his son just wasn't here. When I realized that he was too sick to tell whether or not I was his son, knowing how much he needed me, I stayed."

If the Marine in our story had decided to leave the dying old man after discovering he was not his father, I'm sure that many of us would not hold any sort of grudge against him. After all, was it really his responsibility to sit there all night and provide comfort to a complete stranger? Maybe not, but the Marine selflessly and lovingly saw that he was needed and decided to act on the compassion that he was feeling.

As I think about my friend's one word for summarizing the Bible, I believe that it works well considering all that Jesus has done and will do for us. Especially as we walk with him to the cross during these next few days of Holy week. Our Gospel story for today begins and ends with love: Jesus' love for his own and a call for the disciples' to love one another. Now not only does Jesus demonstrate this love through foot washing, but he also instituted a celebration of communion so that his disciples and all of us would have a way to remember him and obtain forgiveness of our sins.

Of course, Jesus' final expression for showing us just how much affection he had, and still has, for all of creation was carried out when he was arrested, crucified on a cross, and then laid in a tomb. Love is the true evidence that we belong to Jesus Christ. The church leader Tertullian quoted the pagans as saying of the Christians, "See how they love one another?"

And how do we evidence that love? By doing what Jesus did: laying down our lives for our brothers and sisters in Christ, by putting their needs before our own. And the way to start is by getting down and washing one another's feet in sacrificial service. We can say that we love our neighbors or our church friends, but saying it is not as affective as actually doing something about it. As disciples of Jesus we need to live out God's love every day of our lives. Amen.