

“The Ministry of the Towel”

A Service of Deacon Ordination

John 13:1-17; Acts 6:1-7; 1 Timothy 3:8-10 ¹

What do you think about when you hear the word “towel”? Wikipedia lists more than a dozen types of towels, including bath towels, beach towels, foot towels, hand towels, kitchen towels, paper towels, sports towels, and tea towels.²

The word “towel” is actually in the Bible, but it only appears in one place—in John 13, when Jesus used a towel to teach His disciples about leadership on the night that He was betrayed. I invite you to turn with me to John 13 so we can refresh our memory of that event. I’ll begin reading at the first verse: ¹ *It was just before the Passover Festival. Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.*

² *The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already prompted Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus.* ³ *Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God;* ⁴ *so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist.* ⁵ *After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples’ feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.*

⁶ *He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, “Lord, are you going to wash my feet?”*

⁷ *Jesus replied, “You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand.”*

⁸ *“No,” said Peter, “you shall never wash my feet.” Jesus answered, “Unless I wash you, you have no part with me.”*

⁹ *“Then, Lord,” Simon Peter replied, “not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!”*

¹⁰ *Jesus answered, “Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you.”* ¹¹ *For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean.*

¹² *When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. “Do you understand what I have done for you?” he asked them.* ¹³ *“You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am.* ¹⁴ *Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet.* ¹⁵ *I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.* ¹⁶ *Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him.* ¹⁷ *Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them” (John 13:1-17).*

There are several important things to notice in this scene, but I’m going to comment on only one of them. As I’m sure you remember, people wore sandals in those days, so their feet were dusty and dirty when they came inside for dinner. Water and towels were available at the door for washing off this dirt, and it was the custom in more well-to-do households for Gentile slaves to wash the feet of guests—such work being considered too menial for a Jew to perform.

That’s why Peter was so shocked that Jesus took up the towel and basin to wash His disciples’ feet. Even more remarkable, Jesus not only humbled Himself to perform this lowly task, but He also washed the feet of Peter, who would soon deny Him, and the feet of Judas, who would soon betray Him. In the only place we see a towel mentioned in the Bible, we see it in the hands of the Master

¹ A sermon by David C. Stancil, Ph.D., delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on September 8, 2013.

² <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Towel>

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When Leonard Bernstein, the celebrated conductor of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, was asked, “What is the hardest instrument in the orchestra to play,” he responded at once: “The hardest instrument to play is second fiddle. I can always get plenty of first violinists. But to find one who plays second violin with as much enthusiasm, or second French horn, or second flute, now that’s a problem! And yet if no one plays second, we have no harmony.”³

Everybody wants to be First. That’s how we humans are. Self-centeredness is one mark of our fallen nature, and its every expression is a demonstration of how far we have fallen from the Master’s heart. And all of this has a great deal to do with what we’re doing together this morning.

Acts 6 records the selection of the first deacons in the early Church. In the first weeks and months following the gift of God’s Spirit at Pentecost, literally thousands of persons had expressed their faith that Jesus of Nazareth was God’s promised Messiah, and they had been baptized as an expression of that faith. ¹ *But as the believers rapidly multiplied, there were rumblings of discontent. The Greek-speaking believers complained about the Hebrew-speaking believers, saying that their widows were being discriminated against in the daily distribution of food.* ² *So the Twelve called a meeting of all the believers.*

They said, “We apostles should spend our time teaching the word of God, not running a food program. ³ And so, brothers, select seven men who are well respected and are full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will give them this responsibility. ⁴ Then we apostles can spend our time in prayer and teaching the word” (Acts 6:1-4, NLT).

Those first deacons had to be persons “*who were well respected, full of the Spirit and wisdom,*” because only persons who are filled with God’s Spirit are able to gladly “play second fiddle,” recognizing that in so doing they’re following the example of Jesus. In the New Testament, deacons were not policy makers or a board of directors. Deacon service began in “KP duty,” and we might say that the farther deacons get from the kitchen, the farther they get from the Bible.

About thirty years later, Paul described several ways to discern whether or not candidates for servant leadership are indeed “*full of the Spirit.*” When Paul wrote to Timothy, the young pastor of the church in Ephesus, about selecting leaders for that congregation, he noted that ⁶ *An elder must not be a new believer, because he might become proud, and the devil would cause him to fall.* ⁷ *Also, people outside the church must speak well of him so that he will not be disgraced and fall into the devil’s trap.*

⁸ *In the same way, deacons must be well respected and have integrity. They must not be heavy drinkers or dishonest with money. ⁹ *They must be committed to the mystery of the faith now revealed and must live with a clear conscience. ¹⁰ **Before they are appointed as deacons, let them be closely examined.** If they pass the test, then let them serve as deacons (1 Timothy 3:6-10, NLT).**

We’re also told that once those first seven deacons were selected, the apostles prayed for them “*as they laid their hands on them*” (Acts 6:6). Such public setting apart for special service is frequently called “ordination,” a practice that goes all the way back to Moses’ appointment of Aaron to serve as the first High Priest of Israel in the wilderness (Exodus 29:22).

³ Ben Patterson, “A Faith like Mary’s,” *Preaching Today*, tape no. 87.

A congregation's setting apart of some of its own for service through ordination is both more important and less important than we may think it is. It's more important than we think it is, because this is not just an isolated moment in the life of one person and in the history of one church. In our ordination of Allen this morning, we stand in the stream of nearly 4,000 years of history in which men and women have been called to carry out God's purposes in the world.

We are not alone today. We have with us at this very moment—as, indeed, we do in every moment—all the heavenly hosts as witnesses (Hebrews 12:1). We dare not take this moment lightly. We must, as we have done, look with serious purpose at Allen's commitment to Christ, at his character as one who will lead us, and at his competence to do so. The Kingdom is at stake.

But ordination is also less than we may think it is. Ordination, in the sense in which we engage in it this morning, is more a human than a divine action. If Allen is indeed called to this work, as we believe he is, then he has already been called and has already been commissioned by God to do it. What we're doing this morning is confirming that call and affirming his willingness to commit himself to it.

Allen, it's important to remember that a title and a certificate do not a Deacon make. What we do today will not make you a better person, impart the Holy Spirit in some special way, or give you some mystical power or authority. But ordination does represent our recognition of God's work in your life, and it is both our invitation to special ministry and our blessing as you undertake it.

Ordination is a beginning, but not an end. It is departure, not arrival; it is casting off, not mooring. Ordination marks the deepening of your commitment, but not its origin. You're continuing today what you've already begun—your personal journey of faith and obedience that has led you to leadership in the community of faith.

As Paul indicated to Timothy, you have been selected by your brothers and sisters in Christ to be ordained as a servant leader because you have already shown yourself to be a leader. As today you assume this more visible role, bear in mind that our congregation will not rise to a higher level of spiritual maturity and commitment than its leaders demonstrate. From this point on, you are no longer a “thermometer” that indicates temperature; you're a “thermostat” who sets the temperature in this congregation. You will lead us to grow or to decline in our faithfulness to Christ in large measure by how you lead us.

Finally, back to the towels. One definition of a towel is that it's “a piece of absorbent fabric used to draw moisture to itself through direct contact.”⁴ Jesus' expression of humility and care with that towel long ago was “up close and personal,” and your ministry among us as a servant leader will be best discharged in ways that are also “up close and personal” with the members of the families under your care.

Providing ministry to your families means investing time in them. Providing ministry means expending the effort it takes to know their names. Providing ministry means to give attention to special days and moments in their lives. Providing ministry means visiting people where they live and work. Providing ministry means being with people in the quiet and ordinary moments of their lives so that you are also able to be with them in the pivotal moments.

There are few privileges more awesome than being invited to serve as an undershepherd of God's Family . . . and it is to this ministry that you are called. You're involved in a work that is not your own. The One who has called you to it is greater than you, and He will equip you to do it. And all God's people said, “Amen!”

⁴ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Towel>