

# “The Ministry of the Towel”

Acts 6:1-7 <sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup>

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 servant leadership on the night that He was betrayed. You remember the story.

Jesus had gathered with His disciples to observe the Passover, and as the meal progressed, Jesus got up, took off His outer cloak, and wrapped a towel around His waist. He poured water into a bowl, and then began to wash the feet of His disciples, one after the other—including the feet of Peter, who would soon deny Him, and the feet of Judas, who would soon betray Him.

Peter protested, but acquiesced; and then, <sup>12</sup> *when [Jesus] 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.* <sup>13</sup> *“You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am.* <sup>14</sup> *Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet.* <sup>15</sup> ***I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you*** (John 13:1-15).

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 degrading 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.

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 didn’t have to think very hard: “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.*”<sup>3</sup>

***Everybody wants to be First.*** That’s how we humans are. Self-centeredness is one mark of our fallen nature, and its constant expression demonstrates 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.

Our text in Acts 6 records the selection of the first deacons in the early Church. As you probably remember, in the first weeks and months following the gift of God’s Spirit at Pentecost, literally thousands of persons had confessed their faith that Jesus of Nazareth was God’s promised Messiah, and they had been baptized as an expression of that faith. <sup>1</sup> *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*

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on October 23, 2016.

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

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

discriminated against in the daily distribution of food. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> And so, brothers, select seven men who are well respected and are full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will give them this responsibility. <sup>4</sup> Then we apostles can spend our time in prayer and teaching the word” (Acts 6:1-4).

It was necessary that those first Deacons 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 boards of directors. Those very first Deacons began their work in “KP duty,” and we wouldn’t miss the mark by much to 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 <sup>6</sup> *An elder must not be a new believer, because he might become proud, and the devil would cause him to fall.* <sup>7</sup> Also, *people outside the church must speak well of him* so that he will not be disgraced and fall into the devil’s trap.

<sup>8</sup> *In the same way, deacons must be well respected and have integrity. They must not be heavy drinkers or dishonest with money.* <sup>9</sup> *They must be committed to the mystery of the faith now revealed and must live with a clear conscience.* <sup>10</sup> *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).

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, more than 3,000 years ago (Exodus 29:22).

Now 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. **Ordination is more important than we think it is**, because this is not just an isolated moment in the life of two people and in the history of one church. In our ordination of Ossie and Minerva this morning, we stand in the stream of thousands of 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 Ossie’s and Minerva’s commitment to Christ, at their character as persons who will lead us, and at their competence to do so. The Kingdom of God is at stake.

**But ordination is also less important 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 Ossie and Minerva are indeed called to this work, as we believe they are, then they have already been called and have already been commissioned by God to do it. What we’re doing this morning is confirming that call and affirming their willingness to commit themselves to it.

Ossie and Minerva, 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 lives, and it is both our invitation to special ministry and our blessing as you undertake it.

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

As Paul indicated to Timothy, you are being affirmed by your brothers and sisters in Christ to be ordained as servant leaders because you have already shown yourself to be leaders. As you assume this more visible role today, 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 "thermometers" that indicate temperature; you're "thermostats" who set 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*."<sup>4</sup> Jesus' expression of humility and care with that towel long ago was "up close and personal," and your ministry among us as servant leaders 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 giving 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!"

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