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John 13:31-38
March 17, 2024

Will You Really Lay Down Your Life for Me?

This past week, the Greater Clark County Rotary held their first ever Service Awards Breakfast at the Downtown Hilton Hotel. These awards were given to members of our community who exemplified Rotary's core value of Service Above Self. I was honored to represent Cascades Presbyterian Church as a sponsor for one of those awards, the Dorman Holcomb Good Samaritan Service Champion Award. It was given to two young life guards who rescued an older man who had experience cardiac arrest while swimming at the local YMCA.

Dorman Holcomb was a charter member of our church, a successful business owner, and a long time member of his Rotary Club. For those of us who knew Dorman knew that he was one who was always ready to lend a helping hand to anyone who needed it.

Some years ago, when I learned that my lunch buddy at Silver Star Elementary School didn't have a bed and was sleeping on a mattress, I called Dorman. We found a set of bunk beds and mattresses, took them to this boy's home, and set up by the time he got home from school. Whenever you would ask Dorman for help with anything, his response was always, "Not a problem."

And it wasn't.

Dorman exemplified one who always put service above self, not because it was required of him by his Rotary Group, but because it was a reflection of the love of Jesus that shined through Dorman. My friends we desperately need more Dormans in this world!

Our scripture today and the question that Jesus asked his disciples comes from the Gospel of John 13:31-38. It took place during Jesus' Last Supper with his disciples before going to the cross. Jesus washed his disciples feet, shared one last meal with them, and then predicted his betrayal by Judas Iscariot. Immediately after Jesus excused Judas to go do what he had to do, he began telling his disciples the most important things he hoped to leave with his friends before his death.

31 When [Judas Iscariot, the traitor] was gone, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man is glorified and God is glorified in him. **32** If God is glorified in him, God will glorify the Son in himself, and will glorify him at once.

33 "My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come.

34 “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. **35** By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

36 Simon Peter asked him, “Lord, where are you going?”

Jesus replied, “Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later.”

37 Peter asked, “Lord, why can’t I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.”

38 Then Jesus answered, “Will you really lay down your life for me? Very truly I tell you, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times!

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

Our question comes as our Nominating Committee is gearing up to consider who God might be calling to new positions of leadership here at Cascades. My hope is that in the coming weeks, should you be called to serve as an elder or deacon, that your prayerful response would be the same as Dorman Holcomb’s, “Not a problem.”

There are a couple of things that strike me in this short story today that I think will give us better understanding of Jesus’ question to us. First what does it mean to glorify God? What is this new command that Jesus gave them? What was behind Peter’s bold statement of loyalty? And finally, what might Jesus be asking us to lay down today as a reflection of our love for him and others?

What does it mean to glorify God?

Five times in two verses, Jesus used the word glorify. So it must be pretty important. The Greek word used here comes from the root doxazo. It means to magnify, esteem, make great, or honor. You might notice a similar word that we use each week as part of our worship, doxology. We are magnifying God and honoring God through our tithes and offerings we give each week. We sing the doxology immediately afterwards so that our attentions are on God and not the gifts that we give.

Jesus said, “Now is the Son of Man glorified and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God will glorify the Son in himself and will glory in him at once.” It is sort of a confusing, circuitous Greek way to acknowledge the oneness of God the Father and the Son who were equally worthy of praise.

This also marked a significant transition into what would come next, what would glorify God most? A new command that Jesus would give.

“Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

Again if we want to quantify how important this is, we will notice that Jesus used this word “love” four times in just two verses.” Now in Greek, there are three

different kinds of love, where as in English we just have one word. There was eros which was a sexual kind of love expressed in a marriage between two people. There was phileo which was a love shared between friends or siblings. And lastly there was the kind of love mentioned here. Agapate which was a love with a moral or higher purpose, such as a sacrificial or serving others kind of love. We'll call it a Dorman Holcomb kind of love.

Later in John Jesus said, "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that they lay down their life for their friends."¹

Jesus commanded his followers to love each other in this way that rest of the world might see it and be drawn into the God's love as well.

Who among us has seen the moving "The Princess Bride?" It begins "at the home of Buttercup, the future Princess Bride. Her small, crude house sits on a hill with beautiful sloping countryside as a backdrop.

Though dressed in drab brown clothes, clearly marking a peasant girl, Buttercup orders others around as though she were royalty. Another peasant named Westley is a laborer on Buttercup's farm, and the narrator says that Buttercup's greatest pleasure in life is tormenting Westley. She refers to him as "farm boy" and makes liberal use of her authority as she orders him about.

Yet no matter how menial the task, Westley always responds the same way: "As you wish."

"Farm boy," Buttercup says, "polish my horse's saddle."

"As you wish."

"Farm boy," she says as she drops two pails at his feet, "fill this with water."

"As you wish."

"Farm boy, fetch me that pitcher."

"As you wish."

Though Buttercup is maddeningly condescending, Westley is the model servant. He never refuses her demands, and his attitude is kind and willing.

The narrator reveals that one day Buttercup has a precious insight. He reads, "That day, she was amazed to discover that when he was saying 'As you wish,' what he meant was, 'I love you.'"²

In the same way, Jesus was telling his disciples that the way they would display their love for him by serving one another. Saying, "As you wish." Or "Not a problem!"

What should your response be if someone from the Nominating Committee calls? "As you wish. Not a problem."

¹ John 15:12-14

² <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2005/february/15773.html>

When Jesus was saying this to his disciples Peter's mind was going in a whole different direction.

Let me give us a little insight into Peter's character. He was a passionate, but very selfish, self centered follower of Jesus. The first one to say "yes, I'll do that," but the last to follow through. On Easter morning, he will be the first one to take off for the empty tomb, but the last one to show up. His mouth says yes, but his actions, or lack thereof, say something entirely different. He knew how to love himself, but others, not so much.

Have you ever known people like that? People who lacked follow through? Or faithfulness? Or who were always right and never open to the ideas of others? Or people who thought of themselves so highly that they were barely self aware of their own shortcomings? It's hard to be around these folks, let alone trust them.

Conversely, have you ever known someone whose words always matched up with their actions?

It is much easier to trust these folks.

The Apostle Paul wrote to the Philippians, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but the interests of others.

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

Who being in the very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped or exploited, but made himself nothing, taking on the very nature of a servant [like washing his disciples' feet] being made in human likeness.

And being found in the appearance of a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross."³

So while on the outside Peter appeared to be very gung ho and supportive of Jesus, willing to follow wherever he led, on the inside, he just couldn't do it.

When Jesus said, "Where I am going, you cannot follow me now, but later you will follow."

Peter boldly exclaimed, "Lord, why can't I follow you now? I will lay my life for you."

Jesus answered, "Really Peter? Will you really lay down your life for me?" Truly I tell you, three times before the rooster crows in the morning, you will disown me three times."

And indeed as we will see on Maundy Thursday after Jesus was arrested, three times people associated Peter as being a follower of Jesus. And each time, Peter said, "Nope! I didn't even know the guy." Ouch.

It is one thing to tell people we love them. It is entirely something else to show it through our actions.

³ Philippians 2:3-8

And finally, what might Jesus be asking of us as we hear this question of our own willingness to lay down our lives for him and others? Remember whenever Jesus asks a question, it is never because he doesn't know the answer to it himself. He asks to see if we know the answer to it.

And so, would we be willing to lay down our egos, our self centeredness, our pride, or even our just being right as Jesus demonstrated in being sacrificed on the cross?

What cross is Jesus inviting us to bear today?

Is it an opportunity to do something for someone even though we don't think they are very deserving?

Is it a chance to serve in leadership at the church in this next season?

Is it a chance to do something helpful that we would rather not do?

Is it the chance to show kindness to an opponent who makes our blood curdle every time we listen to them?

Is it the need to give up something that we do which causes other people's pain?

Is it giving up the right to always being right?

Is it the need to reconcile with someone who we haven't talked with in a while because of the pain and hurt they've cause us or we've caused them?

Whatever your cross is...

The Apostle Paul said that before we can even offer our gifts at the altar, we must go first and try to be reconciled. Then we can bring our gifts to God.⁴ All God is asking is that we reach out a hand of peace. Whether or not that is received is not up to us. That's up to God. But we can do our part.

Remember from last week's sermon, we can't do any of this on our own, with our own strength, and our own power. But with Jesus living in us, we can.

I will close with one more example from a movie. Being that it was just The Oscars Week, it seems quite fitting.

"In the movie *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, Maggie Smith plays Muriel Donnelly, a cranky British retiree living in a dilapidated hotel in Jaipur, India. She is wheelchair-bound so the hotel staff assigned a Dalit or outcaste woman to care for her.

The woman invites Muriel to her home so that her whole family can meet her. Muriel goes with a translator because the Dalit woman and her family don't speak English. When the Dalit woman showers Muriel with food and hospitality, Muriel asked the translator why. The translator responds, "Because you have been kind to her." Muriel shamefully responds, "But I haven't been kind." The translator responds, "You're the only one who acknowledges her."

⁴ Matthew 5:24

For a poor, Dalit woman, the fact that Mariel saw her and talked with her, even though it was more at her, was an acknowledgment of her worth and their common humanity. When we go out as pursuers in eternal relationship with Jesus, we start to see people no one else sees. God's heart becomes our heart."⁵

In the early church, it is said, that a major factor which influenced the explosive growth of the Christian Faith in the pagan Roman world was the witness of how differently the Christians lived in relationship to the world around them. Pagans were reportedly saying, "See how much they loved others and how they care for each other."⁶ And people wanted to be part of a movement like that. Imagine if every Christian lived like that today. We would change the world!

So may we humble ourselves and follow Jesus' example of being a loving servant to all. May we prayerfully consider what barriers must be removed for us to do so. And when the opportunity comes to do some act of service, may we say, "As you wish. Not a problem!" In doing so, we will glorify God and Jesus, and make them know to the world around us by our love.

Amen!

⁵ Paul Borthwick, Missions 3:16 (IVP 2020), page 105 as posted on <https://www.preachingtoday.com/search/?query=loving%20others&page=2>

⁶ J. Warren Smith, "See How These Christians Love One Another" on Christian History Institute website at <https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/see-how-these-christians-love>