

*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.
Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.*

Sometime last year or the year before, at the annual ordination of new deacons - it may have been at the ordination of our own Willie Font - the Bishop's sermon caught many of us a little off guard. Among other things, he told the soon-to-be new deacons and existing clergy gathered there that if they weren't doing something in the service of people in need *every week*, then they weren't living up to their ordination vows.

Every week. Nervous clergy glanced at each other around the room. Did we just hear him correctly? Father Nate may or may not have been nodding off at about this time but now he was wide awake as he snapped to attention.

If you aren't doing something in the service of people in need every week, then you aren't living up to your ordination vows. Soon after the sermon, the new deacons would agree in the Bishop's examination that "At all times, your life and teaching are to show Christ's people that in serving the helpless they are serving Christ himself."

At their own ordinations, all clergy had made the same pledge. Further, all of us baptized Christians had pledged in the Baptismal Covenant to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves.

The Bishop's sermon left many of us wondering if, over time, that pledge had been crowded out by the many other demands of work, the church, and life in general. Was once a week really the expectation?

I immediately began compiling a mental list of how I measured up to this standard. I mean, what if the bishop asked for a ledger-style accounting the next day?

I at least attend church once a week - does that count? I do help prepare the altar for Holy Eucharist - is that serving people in need? Do I need to arrange more volunteer days at the food bank, or do we need to collect more cereal and Hamburger Helper for the St. James food pantry?

If the question is, "is serving someone in need once a week too much or too little to ask?", I believe Jesus' answer is...yes. It is both too much and too little.

The world around us has SO much need - it needs all the service we could possibly give it, both individually and collectively. There's no such thing as "too much" where serving our tired and desperate world is concerned. It's impossible to even start to list all the needs but here's a few.

Too many neighbors are living on the streets, in cars, or in shelters due to high housing costs, relationship issues, and lack of access to addiction or mental health treatment.

Families struggle with food insecurity.

Immigrants long to participate in our country's safety and prosperity but are turned away or forced to live in the shadows.

People of color are weary of dealing with overt and subtle forms of discrimination.

Our LGBTQ friends too often don't feel safe in their own communities.

We could spend every minute of every day serving meals to the hungry, collecting donations for the poor, or writing letters to lawmakers advocating for just and inclusive policies - and it would make just the tiniest bit of difference.

But the good thing about big problems is that even the smallest actions to address them will make some difference. There is such a giant quantity of need that there's plenty of opportunity for us to just start chipping away at it. There's no such thing as "too little" where serving our tired and desperate world is concerned.

Serving some meals means that some people do get fed, as opposed to no one being able to eat.

Collecting some donations means that some people will get winter clothing, instead of everyone being left out in the cold.

Advocating for inclusive and common-sense government policies can result in incremental change that will, over time, make a huge impact.

At the ordination, the slightly panicked clergy seemed to forget in the moment that scripture and our liturgies constantly remind us of our duty to serve others. The most prominent of these reminders is every year on Maundy Thursday, the night of the Last

Supper, when Jesus tells us: *I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.*

Serving the needs of others is the way we have a share in Jesus' inheritance of the kingdom of heaven. As Jesus commands us tonight, *"unless I wash you, you have no share with me...for I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you."*

Constantly, intentionally, and joyfully serving the needs of others was Christ's faithful example, and it is how we can demonstrate our commitment as his disciples: *"by this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."*

The Gospel story is one example after the other of Jesus' healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, restoring faith to the hopeless, and all manner of reaching out in love to those who are different, disadvantaged, or disenfranchised.

Now, it is our turn – our command, actually - to live the life that Jesus has demonstrated for us by serving people in need in large and small ways.

At the same time, we have to balance family, work, and service to keep ourselves prepared and refreshed for the work ahead. From that standpoint, doing it all may be too much. But Jesus makes it clear tonight that doing nothing is simply not an option.

Serving and loving one another happens when we show kindness to others who are not like ourselves, such as the kindness Jesus showed to the Samaritan woman at the well who needed water in the heat of the day.

Serving and loving one another happens when we comfort the sick, as Jesus did in his many instances of healing, like of the lame man, who had been waiting for 38 years to be healed, or the leper, who he didn't hesitate to touch.

Serving and loving one another happens when we forgive others, such as when, on the even of his crucifixion, Jesus forgave both Peter and Judas, knowing that they would fail him by denying their friendship with him or betraying him to the authorities.

Tonight, let us all remember our vows, and be re-energized to do something in the service of people in need as often as we have the opportunity. May we live our call to seek and serve Christ in all persons. And just as Christ has loved us, may we also love one another. Amen.

