

1 Peter 3:13 Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good?

14 But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated,

15 but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you;

16 yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame.

17 For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil.

18 For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit,

19 in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison,

20 who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water.

21 And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you-- not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,

22 who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

John 14:15 "If you love me, you will keep my commandments.

16 And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.

17 This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

18 "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.

19 In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live.

20 On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.

21 They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them."

Sermon: Diaconia

Loving Creator, shine as a light before me that you may be seen and not I.

Give me words that I may speak give us ears that we may hear and through your Holy Spirit help us understand.

Amen.

Last week, when Hearts Willing hosted their Thanksgiving dinner, they asked if some young people would be willing to help as wait staff. Since the confirmands are asked to find some kind of service to do as part of their process, we had two young ladies come to wait tables.

With 105 people seated in the dining room they had plenty to do. They were bringing food to tables, they were fetching coffees and drinks and whatever people needed. They did a great job serving.

It makes a big difference to a diner to have an attentive server. When we eat out, the enjoyment of the meal can be enhanced by a good server and the experience can become uncomfortable if the service is bad.

I can still remember the only time my parents left no tip after eating out. I want to say we were in the Catskills and the place was very busy. We waited and waited for everything, and then the orders were wrong; it was a terrible experience.

I have been told that if one were to go out to eat in Greece the server would be called a deacon. I bet you always wondered why Deacons serve communion, they are the wait staff of the church!

Actually the answer is not quite that simple.

The word deacon comes from the Greek diaconia, meaning to serve. A deacon is a servant.

In Paul's first letter to Timothy, he describes those who should be Deacons.

Deacons likewise must be serious, not double-tongued, not indulging in much wine, not greedy for money; they must hold fast to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.

Words from this root appear frequently in the New Testament, occurring over a hundred times. The word is more than simply a servant, it suggests one who cares for the needs of others, one who ministers.

Deacons serve and minister to others. Did you deacons hear that? You are servants and ministers, not just the ones who serve communion and do the dishes after church.

So the Deacons serve, they minister.

If you look at your bulletins, where we have the list of those who are participating in the worship service as Ministers, does it say the Pastor is the minister? Does it say the Deacons are ministers? It says ministers of First Church – all the members.

We are all part of the work of Jesus Christ by virtue of our baptism, not only the Deacons.

Service is one of the five marks of the church: community, learning, service, worship and proclamation. Without service, we would not be a church, and without serving we are not living out our vows as Christians.

What is Christian service, and how does it fit here in Monson and in our own walk of faith?

On the night he was betrayed, Jesus took off his cloak and tied a towel around his waist, and he filled a basin with water, and he washed the disciples feet. We remember this on Maundy Thursday.

Washing feet was the work of the servant in those days. Getting down on the ground to wash feet was a job for people of low social status.

The word Maundy means mandate or commandment. When Jesus was finished washing their feet, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord-- and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you."

This is the new commandment, the new mandate, Jesus gave his disciples, serve one another.

It was clear in Jesus' teachings that serving one another is part of life in Christ. Jesus became the lowly servant for his friends to show what service and leadership look like. We are not to take high places, or place ourselves above another; we are to care for each other.

This is not a commandment to go out to feed the hungry in the community, I'll come back to that, this was not a commandment to take care of those who are far off, it was a commandment to serve one another, a command to follow Jesus example within a community.

He got down on the ground and humbled himself to show what it meant to serve in love.

How can we follow this example?

Paul says in Romans "Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.

Love one another and outdo each other in showing honor.

The world in which we live is all about status, wealth, power and authority. Leaders who are seen as effective are commanding, they choose and lead by telling others what to do. They use authority to get privileges. They take the places of honor at special occasions.

They want to be seen with other power brokers and avoid those who might make them seem lower.

It is hard to imagine the powerbrokers of this world outdoing each other in honor. Can we imagine Donald Trump taking the bus and giving up his seat. Not easily because he probably would not ride a bus. Could we see him making life easier for his servants by giving of himself to do them honor?

I don't know, and I don't want to pick on The Donald specifically. Can we imagine a king or queen stooping down to tie the shoelace of a commoner? It is about power and authority.

Jesus had power and authority, but he does not lord it over his friend and followers. He shows them a different paradigm where the leader serves and is humble.

I know that some people think of service work as beginning with mission trips or with sending money overseas or someplace else. What Jesus calls us to here is a profound sense of intimate community. This is a complete transformation of the power structures we see in the world.

When I spoke of community a few weeks ago, I said that when someone in the church found out they had cancer, people rallied and made food, and they tried to find out what they could do to help.

If we had someone who needed rides to the doctor, we would try to make that happen. If a member of the church had financial troubles, we would try to provide for them. We would do those things regardless of their authority or social status.

In some ways this is about community, but it is also about service. These marks of the church do not have clean edges at times. Helping another member of the church community is service, and it builds community.

A healthy church should take this commandment to heart.

The Ladies who are making prayer shawls have been gathering in community to pray and to make shawls. They then give them to people who could use some encouragement and support. It is service of a most beautiful sort.

The people who receive the shawls are touched by the care of their church family.

The Deacons had a visit from the Called to Care ministry of United Church in Wilbraham. They have a visitation ministry run by people who want to serve those who are in need within the church. They visit people who are hospitalized, in nursing homes or homebound. They find out about these needs within the church. They visit members and friends of the church and others connected through the church family. Our Deacons would like to see this kind of ministry here at First Church.

This is a place that service can begin: with those closest to us, just as Jesus demonstrated as he washed the disciples' feet.

By serving each other in the body of Christ, the body gets stronger.

This image of a body is a good one.

If I catch a cold, do I give cold medicine to someone else? No, I need the cold medicine in my body. If I don't take care of my body, it will become less and less healthy. If I lose my health and strength, I become less effective in all that I do.

Any church community is the same, if the community does not serve each other, and care for each other, the church becomes weak and loses the ability to do much more than stay alive.

Sometimes churches put such a priority toward reaching out that they do not stay healthy because they may neglect the other marks of the church. They do lots of missions, but do they care for each other? They work hard on service projects, but are they continuing their Christian education? Where is the balance?

I have seen churches that are so concerned with giving to the wider world that they neglect what is in their own church. They may be giving huge amounts to mission work outside the church, but they do not outdo each other in honor, they do not wash one another's feet. They do not do what some churches call in-reach, just like out reach but inside the church family, like Called to Care in Wilbraham.

This is caregiver syndrome.

Caregivers can often give of themselves at the expense of their own health and wellbeing.

I have known a few people who did this.

When I was a nurses aide, a woman I worked with was always taking on extra patients. She loved taking care of people, it made her feel good.

So she worked and worked, and the agency loved it. She would see people nobody else wanted to see, she would work on her days off, she would put in long days.

She put off lots of things, however.

She put off eating right, and sleeping enough. She put off exercise and her family and her doctors appointments.

Eventually she was feeling tired and decided it was time to see a doctor. By this time the cancer she had been growing was already a problem and she had to stop working and taking care of all her patients. Everything came to a standstill while she had treatments and such.

The doctors were upset with her for delaying, because had they found the cancer earlier it would have been very treatable. My friend had taken care of everyone else first and the result was no good.

Many caregivers simply burn out and stop caring because they have no resources left.

Isn't there a saying about putting your own house right before going out to help others?

If my server at the restaurant is ill, or overtired, or otherwise not well, what kind of service am I likely to get?

When a church is healthy, when the connections within the church are strong enough to have a healthy body, our service will be strong and vital as we bring that love out into the world.

Jesus demonstrated this in his life. He took care of himself. He went off to quiet places, and he did rest. Then, when he went through the towns he had the energy to teach and to heal and to spread the love of God.

That is the work that Jesus did and the work we are called do as well: to spread the love of God to others, to care within our walls and then to care beyond them.

Jesus tells a story about service, about ministering, about sharing the love of God.

'For I was hungry, and you gave Me *something* to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me *something* to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.'

"Then the righteous will answer Him, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You *something* to drink?'

'And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You?'

'When did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?'

"The King will answer and say to them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these sisters or brothers of Mine, *even the least of them*, you did it to Me.'

So how does the church feed, clothe, welcome or visit the least of these?

We do this in a number of ways.

Here in First Church we take food to Loaves and Fishes in Springfield; we collect food for the Open Pantry in Monson; we send clothes, mittens and hats to those in need; we

have given prayer shawls to many people outside our church family; we are helping build a home for a family with Habitat for Humanity; we help people with our time and energy.

We do this here in the church and in our community.

We also use our resources to offer our help to those who are far away.

First Church is a five for five church. In the United Church of Christ we have five special offerings each year. OCWM – Our Churches Wider Mission, One Great Hour of Sharing, Neighbors in Need, Strengthen the Church, the Christmas Fund. First Church gives to all five of these. Each of these offerings allows us to reach out beyond our own community.

When retired pastors or their families are in need, the Christmas fund helps them, when Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast, OCWM was able to provide immediate support, and after the tsunami in Indonesia, One Great Hour of Sharing was there to help.

Each of these offerings allows us to be part of the service of the larger Christian community in the world.

There are many other ways that we serve.

Our Deacons are just one group that serves in the church. We also have outreach, Trustees, Christian Education and the other committees, serving in this capacity is vital for the life and work of First Church.

The connections run through this because, as we serve we build community, and, at the same time we, learn about ourselves and our faith.

We can see that service is woven through the life of the church, and the same should be said for each Christian. Service helps us be balanced in our faith.

At the Thanksgiving Dinner we had the two young ladies serving. If you saw them, you know that they were having a great time. It reminded me of the times I did the same thing when I was a teen and worked at church suppers. That was when I began to learn the joy of service.

The Nomads of Hope have had the opportunity to discover the same truth, service can actually be fun and fulfilling. It builds community and it teaches us about others and it teaches us about ourselves. We can see changes in those who have gone to serve with the Nomads of Hope, they come back transformed.

The old hymn says: they will know we are Christians by our love by our love, yes they'll know we are Christians by our love.

Love is the commandment, and, when we live in love, we are called to share the love of Christ.

How do we serve? How do we serve the church, each other and the wider world?

As the young ladies waited on tables at the dinner last week, they were learning about serving, folks who go to Loaves and Fishes learn about serving, the Nomads travel all over to learn about serving as we give to our five offerings we are learning to serve. We, as First Church, reach out into the world to serve in many ways.

Serving on a committee, visiting those in hospital, nursing homes or the homebound, helping with the life of First Church are also ways to serve.

Paul reminds us that there are varieties of service, but the same Lord.

There are countless other ways that we can offer ourselves and follow Jesus' commandment to serve one another just as he served us.

If we follow his commandments we will remain in him, and he will remain in us.

Jesus calls us to follow him, and to serve in his name.

Next week: leturgia

Thanks be to God.
AMEN.