

40 DAYS OF COMMUNITY- CALLED TO SERVE TOGETHER

By Rev. Leo Douma

John 13:1-17

I read a quote which said “Most people wish to serve God- but only in an advisory capacity”! In 1878 when the Salvation Army was beginning to make its mark, men and women from all over the world began to enlist. One man, who once dreamed of being a bishop, crossed the Atlantic from America to England to join the Salvation Army. The man, Samuel Brengle had been a minister in a well-to-do church. But William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, was reluctant to accept Samuel Brengle. He said “You have been your own boss for too long.” To instill humility in Brengle, Booth set him to work cleaning the shoes of the other trainees. Brengle was quite discouraged and said to himself “Have I followed by own fancy across the Atlantic in order to polish the shoes of others!?” And then as a vision, he saw Jesus bending over the feet of rough, uneducated fishermen. “Lord” he prayed, “you washed their feet, I will polish their shoes.” Today is the fifth Sunday in the 40 Days of Community. Our theme for this week is “*Called to serve together*”. I want us to understand the thrust of that theme by looking at the example of Jesus here in John 13. John the Baptist once said of Jesus as he was speaking to the crowd: (John 1:27) “*He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.*” The people well understood what he meant. To remove the sandals of another and wash their feet was seen as one of the lowest duties of the day. People in those days did not tuck their feet under the table; they reclined on couches around the table. So the feet had to be cleaned of the sweat and manure dust from walking on the tracks. Those tracks were used by donkeys and camels as well, and you know what they left on the road. It was the job of a slave to clean the stinking feet. But John the Baptist says that in comparison to Jesus he is so low he was not good enough to offer to wash Jesus’ feet. Yet here in our text we see Jesus Himself doing the degrading job of a slave. Now grasp the significance of the event. Here is God kneeling in humble service before his creatures, sinful creatures. Our text says in verse 3 “*Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under His power, and that He has come from God and was returning to God.*” So Jesus is very conscious of his own majesty. He “*comes from God*”, He is God; “*all things are under his power*”. Jesus is not just a ‘softie’, the weak one, who does the dirty job. Here is the Son of God, God on His knees deliberately giving his disciples a message. Verse 1 “*It was just before the Passover feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave the world to go to the father. Having loved his own in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love.*” Jesus knows that the next day he will die on the cross. So his washing of the disciples feet is an “acted parable”; a sign of what he is about to do. Feel the situation here with the disciples reclining at the table with their dirty feet, no one wanting the foot washing job. In our culture it is the equivalent of going to a restaurant in your underpants- all sitting their stupidly because no one wants to admit their wrong to the other. They end up in this situation because a power struggle is going on. Another gospel says they were arguing as to who was the “*greatest among them*”. No one would stoop to foot washing, not when they were trying to establish the political pecking order amongst them. So Jesus strips off to his loin cloth and kneels before the disciples and quietly goes about washing and drying their feet. There is no lecture, just the quite example that leaves the disciples dumbstruck. Until of course Peter speaks up. Peter never was one to keep quiet. For him this whole scene is wrong, a total screw up. He doesn’t want Jesus washing his feet. It’s wrong. He does not want a humble servant for a master. He wants Jesus to stand up, to achieve, to do great things. It is not right to see a king on his knees serving! He wants a powerful leader so he can be a powerful second in command. Peter doesn’t get the parable here that Jesus must serve, that he must suffer to pay for sin. It takes a lot of humility to admit that Jesus needed to die for sin, that we cannot make it on our own, that every one of us is rotten to the core, deserving eternal hell. If you think about it, it is not right to see God as a servant, a slave suffering for our wrong. But that’s what God in his grace has done; stooped to serve to give us forgiveness, hope, life! Jesus was not forced to wash the disciples’ feet, like so often the weakest,

the smallest in the group is humiliated into doing. Being a servant, suffering for sin, is his decision. It was his mission that stemmed from his love, from the Father's grace.

Now, Jesus' actions were not just for him. He says what he did was also an example; that if we accept Jesus as Saviour and Lord we have to do as he did. Let's be real honest here, this is not easy, it goes right against the grain. Much of our society, especially at work, is 'success' driven, the drive for higher and better things. You surely don't expect the boss to get everyone coffee, that's the trainee's job. Even in religion it's hard to accept a humble suffering master. In theology we have tended more to see God as the creator, Lord of all, than the triune God, where the Son humbly serves the Father and the Spirit serves the Son. Serving is often considered to be beneath us. Do you argue in your house about who cleans the toilets, or do you pay some one else to do it? What is a task you think is beneath you? Now Jesus comes to us and says (verse 15) "*I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.*" It blew the disciples away. Their culture was very clear on the rabbi-disciple relationship. The teacher was so much greater than the disciples. The teacher's way was absolute. Yet here their teacher, the one who had done things implying he was God, had acted as their slave; and he says you do it to each other. And they must because they are not greater than Jesus (verse 16: "*No servant is greater than his master*"). They cannot say "You perhaps Lord, but not us; it's beneath us." Here Jesus challenges our whole way of life. Christianity is not just about going to church, trying to be polite, trying not to swear. We are called to a life of service; living for others. Many people are looking for happiness, when God tells us to look for opportunities to serve. That's what life is about. We were put here by God to serve Him; and the way we serve God is by serving other people. A friend once said to his wife "I love God more than you". He wanted to emphasize his deep commitment to God. But he put it wrong. He should have said "I love God deeply, and I will show it by my love and devotion for you." Now the bible has a word for serving others; it's called 'ministry'. In the Greek the word for 'service' and 'ministry' are the same word. And in the bible the word 'servant' and 'minister' are the same word. So all of us are called to ministry because all of us are called to serve God and others. You don't need a title like 'pastor' or 'elder' to be involved in ministry. You simply need to be active doing something. And the something you are called to do has to do with your S.H.A.P.E. – spiritual gifts, heart (passion), abilities (like work skills), personality, experiences. Your S.H.A.P.E. determines your ministry, what you are suited to, your unique contribution to the church and kingdom of God. But while you may have a particular S.H.A.P.E., what you actually contribute to the kingdom is determined by your attitude. It's your attitude, your servant's heart, your willingness to imitate Jesus' serving that determines your spiritual maturity; your attitude determines what you will actually do for the kingdom of God. The greatest thrill in life is to be used by God and know that he chose to use you. God is using ordinary people like you and me to help bring peace to the earth, to save sinners, to restore the entire universe, to bring in his kingdom. So, what does it take to be used and learn to serve like Jesus? It's quite simple really. It's about being willing to put your hand up, because you make yourself available. To serve like Jesus did means we are available as Jesus was. You and I must be willing to be interrupted. Look at the gospels. Jesus didn't do healings by appointment. So often people approached Jesus and he stopped where he was going and attended to their needs. Are we available? Are you willing to say "God what do you want me to do?" Let's be honest for a moment. Let me give some common barriers to being available. One is self-centredness. We see it with the disciples, too busy jostling about who was greatest to even consider doing the menial job of foot washing. The number one enemy of compassion is busyness. I am so busy I have no time to serve. I have my agenda, my plans, my ambitions. To become a real servant we need to be open to being interrupted. Lord who are you putting across my path today? Where can I serve another, now, today? It could be as simple as doing the dishes for mum when your favourite TV show is on. Or the church needs some people to help with an outreach project. The second barrier to being used by God is perfectionism. It's about having the perfect conditions before you will serve, or feeling you are not good enough and you don't want to embarrass yourself. But look at the bible, who apart from Jesus was perfect? If God only used perfect people nothing would

get done. Like Peter and the rest of the disciples we are all a bunch of misfits. We all have weaknesses. We all have faults. But God, as he has always done in salvation history, uses people where they are to do His great task. The one question God asks of us is; Are you available? Now one other important thing to learn to be a servant like Jesus, you must learn the difference between significance and prominence. They are not the same thing. A lot of people think that if something is given a lot of visibility, prominence, then it's the most important. But that's not true. Some really significant moments in another's faith can come about by actions completely unnoticed by others. Years ago two teenage boys tried to come into a church service at night; but it was packed out and they couldn't find any seats. So they turned around and decided to leave because they couldn't find anywhere to sit. But one usher said "Come on guys, I'll find you a seat." And that usher personally escorted them down the aisle and searched until he found them seats. That night both of those boys accepted Christ and became Christians. One of them was Billy Graham who went on to minister to millions of people around the world. Does anyone remember the usher? No. Was his action prominent? No. Was his service significant? Yes! Has God noticed the actions of the usher? Yes! "Well done good and faithful servant." This week in the 40 Days of Community devotional book the chapter headings are: being willing to serve; by helping each other; by being generous with each other; by being humble with each other; by using our talents to bless each other; by sacrificing for each other; by cooperating with each other. Serving each other is so important. That email you shoot off during a moment at work to encourage some one can be the turning point in their faith struggle. That child you are teaching in Kidschurch may be so inspired by your story telling that a spark is ignited that sees him becoming a great preacher for God. We have no idea of the significance of small acts. Real servants do every task, no matter how menial, how unseen, with equal devotion because we want to serve like Jesus did, because we are available for God in whatever he calls us to do. Our church, too, needs you to be involved in ministry. We are virtually a brand new congregation with so many new families all coming together in a short space in time. It's very important for all of us to consider, what is my S.H.A.P.E.; what is my attitude, am I available, am I willing to do whatever the task is, prominent or unseen. It is very important that we all have M.B.A.'s- "Mop Bucket Attitude's". Whatever the task Lord, I'll serve, because I love you for serving me. If God can stoop to serve, so can I. Doing so does not mean we lose out. Jesus said (:17) "*Now that you know these things you will be blessed if you do them.*" The great violinist, Nicolo Paganini, willed his marvelous violin to Genoa, the city of his birth, but only on the condition that the instrument never be played upon. It was an unfortunate condition, for it is a peculiarity of wood that as long as it is used and handled, it shows little wear. As soon as it is discarded, it begins to decay. The exquisite, mellow-toned violin has become worm eaten in its beautiful case, valueless except as a relic. The moldering instrument is a reminder that a life withdrawn from all service to others loses its meaning. Bless yourself; serve others and let them experience the grace of God honor God by imitating Jesus.