

The Rev. T. Stewart Lucas
Pentecost 20, Proper 24
October 18, 2009
Mark 10: 35-34

Well it is that time of year again. The cold crisp air. The chrysanthemums are blooming and the now soaking wet corn stalks are displayed around town. You might think that it's also time to be thinking about Stewardship in the church, and yes we need your pledges to come in on November 8. You'll be getting a great letter from Lori this week and a booklet of meditations from your fellow parishioners next week. But I've decided not to preach on stewardship this morning. Instead I want to talk about doing laundry.

Last weekend we got to welcome back a few of our freshmen college students who were home for the first time since there was a long weekend. The first question I asked them was "How many loads of laundry did you bring?" Their mothers laughed out loud. I remember those days. Finally giving in and driving home after finding a new found freedom in college, not necessarily because you missed home, but because you were hungry and didn't have any clean underwear left.

I was blessed enough to have a mother who did all of our laundry. Every week. Load after load. She still does if I take them home. And she never complained. I didn't know what a labor of love that was until I finally had to grow up somewhat and do my own. It's funny that when you have to do your own laundry, you find ways to keep your clothes cleaner longer and you might even wear things three or four times.

I don't really like doing laundry, so I found someone to spend the rest of my life with who does. I'd say I only do about 20% of the laundry now. It's a good agreement in my mind, though I do love our washing machine. We finally got one of those front-loading Kenores with the clear door and a great chrome hood ornament. When it first arrived we took chairs down to the basement and just watched the clothes go round and round. Doesn't take much to entertain us.

I guess it's different in other parts of the world though. This week I realized just how blessed I really am when I read a letter from The Reverend Lauren Stanley, appointed missionary of The Episcopal Church to Haiti. Lauren was a just a few years ahead of me in seminary, and her passion for mission has taken her around the world including Sudan. She writes:

"The power went out – again – the other day, leaving me with little to do on the computer. No power, no Internet. No Internet, no connection with others. So I did what I usually do: I washed my clothes."

She continues: "Washing clothes in Haiti is arduous work. Most of us do it by hand, in round rubber tubs, sitting, in my case, on the edge of the shower stall. It's not like washing clothes at home.

Here, washing clothes is intentional work. You pour water in the tub, add soap, dump in the clothes (not too many at once), let them soak a bit, then start churning away. You take the special bar of laundry soap and scrub at stains and dirt. You examine each article of clothing individually to make sure it's clean. You rub the material together to get the clothes cleaner. Then you wring each piece out and put them in another tub.

Each piece of clothing gets dipped and swished and swirled through the clean water. You wring again and again. Then you hang up your clothes in your bathroom, or out on a line if you have one (but they'll get dirty outside, hanging in the polluted air, so drying them inside seems to be the better option). Finally, you wait ... sometimes overnight ... for your things to dry.”¹

In this morning's gospel Jesus is not doing laundry, but instead he says, “Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve.”

Now we know what it means to serve. I serve you communion. You serve your family a meal. You serve a tennis ball. St. Margaret's serves the community by praying and giving grants and doing projects. We are comfortable offering something to someone else of our free will. It feels wonderful to set the table with china and silver and linen napkins and serve guests. We have ownership over this type of service.

But slave? And even worse...Jesus says to be slave of all. Who constitutes all? All the people I know? All the people I like? All the people in Annapolis? In the U.S.? In the world?

Maybe another question is WHAT is all? To be great, to be first, we must be “slave of all,” Jesus says. All what? Slave of all forgiveness? Slave of all understanding? Slave of all compassion? Slave of all justice and mercy?

In Paul's writings in the New Testament, he writes that we were once all **slaves to sin**, but with the coming of Jesus we now are all **enslaved to God**. A righteous God. A God of compassion A God that requires of us kindness and mercy. A loving God that requires us to serve. A gracefilled God who requires us to give? But how? How do you serve? How do we give?

It's tempting to make a laundry list of all the activities here at St. Margaret's we can participate in to help other people. Maybe then this would be a stewardship sermon. But I'd rather simply talk about laundry again. Lauren continues her letter home:

“It can be a tedious job, doing the wash by hand, but even so, I've found some blessings in it. All this cleaning and scrubbing has become good prayer time. As I wash, especially those collars on my shirts, I find myself thinking about the people and places I love, and sending prayers to God for their well-being. I pray for the end of war and violence and oppression. I pray for others' happiness. For peace in the world. For the people with whom I served for four years in Sudan. For my incredibly extended family. I give thanks for the blessings of my life, and pray for

¹ Lauren Stanley, Episcopal Café column Oct. 2009.

guidance in my ministry. **My hands do the work and my eyes watch for stains, but my heart and soul are with God the whole time.”**

The lesson I have learned from Lauren’s witness is that you have to **serve from where you are.**

If you are in Haiti and have to do the wash by hand, serve by praying for those whom you love and those whom you are sent to love. If you live in Cape St. Claire or Eastport or Arnold or Crofton and do the wash in a big white machine with Tide striving to make dirty things clean for you and your family, serve by praying for those who wore those clothes and those whom they came in contact with. If you sit in carpool, serve by being nice to the person who just cut you off and tell your children God loves people when they are not nice too. If you sit at a desk in an office building serve by welcoming those who pass by your way. If you are the grocery buyer in your home, serve by looking directly at the deli-counter worker or the stock person or the check-out person just long enough to let them know you see them.

Serve from where you are. Turns out this is a stewardship sermon after all. Sometimes God calls us to amazing HUGE sell your house or build a new building and make great sacrifices kinds of ministry. Sometimes God calls us to simply wash the clothes of a loved-one...an act of incomparable intimacy all its own. It is all about stewardship. It’s all about giving back.

Give from where you are. Employed or looking for a job. With kids at home or kids in college. Single or married. 6 figure income or struggling to pay the rent. Anxious or joyful. 20 percent or tithing or working toward it. But realize that wherever you are, you give from a place of grace and abundant blessing. And all of that blessing comes from God alone. God continues to give regardless of our sinfulness and shortcomings. God gives out of a place of love.

And you know, “I think that some days, God has to work especially hard to get us clean again, dunking us again and again into the waters of forgiveness (and love.) But God doesn’t give up on us. God keeps scrubbing away, keeps checking for hidden stains, keeps soaping up and rinsing and wringing us out until, when God is done, when we have finally acquiesced to all the love God freely offers us, the stained, dirty parts of our lives wash down the drain and God’s love and forgiveness make us clean again.

By the time we finish slaving away at our daily work, we are often exhausted. Our arms get a great workout from all the wringing. We are covered in sweat and the clothes we wore to accomplish our daily tasks are the next ones to go into the laundry basket.”²

As always though, there will never be a shortage of laundry for us to do. There will never be a shortage of people to serve. But at the same time there will never be a shortage of what we actually need in order to survive. There will never be a shortage of ways to be slaves to compassion and love. The challenge for us is to be intentional about the work we do and the amount of time and money we give in order to be considerate of and responsive to the needs of other people. For we are not called to be served, but to serve and to give from where we are. Amen.

² Lauren Stanley’s column again, edited to be plural instead of singular by me.