

Larry Kochendorfer's Installation
25 September, 2010

“Servant of ALL the Servants of God”

John 13:1-35

¹Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. ²The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper ³Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, ⁴got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. ⁵Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. ⁶He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, “Lord, are you going to wash my feet?” ⁷Jesus answered, “You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.” ⁸Peter said to him, “You will never wash my feet.” Jesus answered, “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.” ⁹Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!” ¹⁰Jesus said to him, “One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you.” ¹¹For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, “Not all of you are clean.” ¹²After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, “Do you know what I have done to you? ¹³You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. ¹⁴So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. ¹⁶Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. ¹⁷If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them...

³⁴I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Grace, mercy and peace...

We are here, gathered in the Triune Name - Father, Son and Holy Spirit - to do something we have done many times before, (and which you have experienced three times before, Larry). But by the same token, we are also here to do something that we as the Synod of Alberta and the Territories have not done in a quarter century.

Today, we will set apart an assistant to the bishop. I think a good case could be made for quibbling with all of the language associated with what we are about to do this afternoon. (Many of you know already what I'm going to say...)

Given your responsibilities and your portfolios, Larry, you are being asked and required to serve as a *de facto* bishop. I am asking, the Synod Council has asked (and voted!) that you serve in this role.

So while our Church polity and our constituting documents don't allow for it, let's all be clear in our own minds as to what we are about: we are asking Larry to share the bishop's job and role.

What words clearly describe that?... assisting bishop would be a step in the right direction. Or we could learn from our full communion partners, the Anglicans, to elect and call suffragan bishops. In which case, Larry, you would bear not only the work of the Episcopal office but also the title.

That would work fine for me - and, long story short - that's how I think of you and the yoke being ritually laid upon you today.

Which leads me to my next question: are we installing you, consecrating you, or ordaining you? It all depends on what we collectively understand to be the role you fulfill among us.

I think I've laid out quite clearly, that there's not much question in my mind.

So when we lay hands on you in a little while, Larry, let there be no question in your mind as to what I'm thinking and believing...

Thank you for hearing the Holy Spirit speaking when I invited you to serve with me; thank you for hearing and accepting the Synod Council's call to you to this special service --- again, the Holy Spirit's voice. Be affirmed by your brothers and sisters here today, whose presence and blessing confirms that this is the Spirit's will for you.

Larry, you chose John's account of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples, basin and towel in hand, on his knees, doing the servile, often stinky - but much-needed - work that has to be done, within and among the people of God.

An apt image, Larry - apt indeed. With even just two months of experience on the job, you know this to be so.

You are - I am - a washer of feet.

This text brings to mind the words of this hymn - especially its first line: "Lord, whose love in humble service, bore the weight of human need..."

Jesus explains himself and his actions this way:

... if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. ¹⁶Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. ¹⁷If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them...

³⁴I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

The Apostle Paul is particularly helpful to those set apart for church leadership when he says (in 1 Corinthians):

This is how one should regard us: as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God... Moreover it is required of servants that they are found faithful. (1 Cor. 4:1)

So what about us, Larry, who in one sense or another bear the yoke of Episcopal office?... we are SERVANTS of the servants of Christ; we are STEWARDS of the stewards of the mysteries of God.

That's it. That's all. That's the whole thing in a nut-shell.

Enormous! In fact, too much!

Unless we dare to ask the Lutheran question: Was meinte das?.. What does this mean?

It means first of all, that unless we know who we are, we cannot be anything to anybody else (as George Forell famously wrote so many decades ago).

What we cannot be, as we fulfill the office of bishop, is what Stanley Hauerwas describes as “quivering masses of availability”. (Quoted in M. Craig Barnes' *The Pastor As Minor Poet*).

When you don't know who you are and what you are supposed to be doing, you become the pull-toy of a whole host of persons who think they know your calling better than you do. If being liked by everybody is your greatest good, then this is probably not the job for you.

The Lutheran Confessions know only one office of ministry - whether we are pastor, elder, presbyter, bishop, assistant or suffragan. That office is to preach the Word of God in its truth and purity and rightly administer the sacraments.

That's the only office of ministry we know, and it is to that office that we were ordained. Everything that we do has to stem from that calling and role.

But beyond that, the Lutheran Confessions are neither backward nor bashful about saying strong things about the office of bishop. (The Lutheran understanding of who a bishop is and what a bishop does is expressed in the Augsburg Confession, Article XXVIII: Bishops, the Apology XIV: Church Order and XXVIII: Ecclesiastical Power, the Treatise: The Power and Jurisdiction of Bishops, and the Smalcald Articles: The Fourth Article.)

All those cards need to be on the table:

- The bishop's role is as "pastor to pastors and congregations." The bishop has the same duty for the synod as the pastor has for the congregation.
- The bishop is to oversee the theology of the pastors, DM's and congregations, and to teach what is proper - which today is referred to as "the teaching office" of the bishop.
- Bishops do not have the power to institute or establish something contrary to the gospel.
- Bishops do not have the power of tyrants to act apart from established law, nor regal power to act above the law.
- Bishops must not... interpret their traditions in a manner contrary to the gospel. Melanchthon challenges the bishops to teach in such a way that the people hear Christ and his word rather than human traditions.
- Bishops are to be signs and symbols of unity. They are preventers of schism, and correctors of those who depart from the sound doctrine of "the faith once delivered" to the OHCA Church.

No small task, my friends... and not for the faint of heart, especially for the living of these days.

And since that is the case, we will mightily pray the fullness of the Holy Spirit upon and within you, Larry.

We will pledge you our support as you become a leader of Christ's Church in this Synod.

We will look to you for faithful and equitably ministry among us and toward us.

We will hold your feet to the fire if you fail to be a servant to ALL the servants of God in the ABT Synod.

We will hold you up in prayer, and honor you for your work's sake.

As a hen who gathers her chicks under her wings, we call upon you to gather and love us in our peculiarity, diversity, and occasional untowardness of heart.

Our Lord Jesus Christ has put his beauty within and upon us. Seek to see that, Larry, in each and all of us, even when we cannot see it in ourselves.

Welcome to the greatest challenge of your vocation. And may the Lord of the Church bless you in it.

Even so, Come, Lord Jesus.