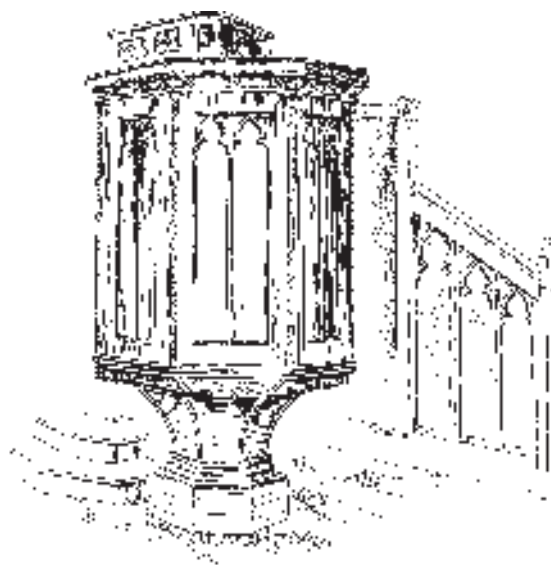


April 19, 2009

Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

Giving and Receiving
by The Reverend Kay Davis-Dudding

John 13: 3-16

It was in November of 1997 that I began my ministry here at Westminster, as your Associate Pastor for Pastoral Care, having served five years in my first call at First Presbyterian in Deckerville, Michigan, a small town in the “thumb” of Michigan. As I think I’ve told you before, there are more people in our Westminster choir than in that little Michigan congregation. Nancy Hodgkins was also called that year, and began her ministry in December. She too, had worked in smaller churches, but this was her first call as an ordained minister.

Small churches had been the experience of each of us. With less than four months at Westminster, she and I were invited to prepare the Lenten study for Session. As we planned, it felt as if we were going way out on a limb for what, at that time, seemed to us to be quite a formal church and Session. We began with Nancy reading the scripture I read this morning and then I did a monologue—by Peter. It was then we held our collective breath and with the elders seated in a circle, lifted the towel which we’d placed in the center of the circle, and revealed a bowl and pitcher. We had decided to do a foot washing.

Though we had each done this in seminary, a foot washing with these seemingly quite formal, and as yet basically unknown to us elders, was questionable to say the least. (We had considered these might be our last days at Westminster.) We went around the room each one washing the feet of the

next person as we reminded them that life in the kingdom is marked by washing the feet of another, and allowing one's feet to be washed. Life among Jesus' followers is marked by the giving and the receiving of care. After the initial surprise, the elders responded quite well to the foot washing and Nancy and I are happily still among you!

Yes, life in the Kingdom includes not only giving, but receiving care, receiving care from our brothers and sisters in the community of faith—not only receiving their care, but believing, that as we receive care from others, we are also receiving care from Jesus Christ. But, you know, we are so much like Peter in our scripture. It can be so hard to have our feet washed. It can be so hard to receive the care of a brother or sister in Christ.

I wonder why it's so hard to receive care? Why do we have such entrenched resistance to acknowledging our need for care and receiving care when it's offered? I think sometimes our resistance has to do with the church in general. We may have an image of church, of our church, as being a place where people don't have problems. As we look around, it often appears that others have it all together. Some of us have an image of the church as a place where you are decidedly better off if you *don't* tell other people about your problems. Don't tell the ministers if you are ill, don't tell them if you are to have surgery, don't tell the ministers—or anyone else for that matter, that you've lost your job, or are having marital problems. Just smile and say you're "fine" in answer to someone's inquiry about how you are this morning.

Now we can do this—or, we can be real and share our burdens—likely not with everyone we meet, but certainly with one of your pastors. Paul's words in Galatians are so very true, and speak to pastoral care and to our on-going Stephen Ministry program here at Westminster. "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ."

Do you know the law of Christ? First, Jesus said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul and all your mind." And there's a second commandment like it, "...to love your neighbor as yourself." These two commandments summarize scripture. But later, he went on to add his new commandment: "A new commandment I give you" he said, "Love one another **as I have loved you.**" And this becomes the standard by which to measure our lives—to love one another as Jesus has loved us. This is the pattern by which to build a church, to build a peaceful world.

But how could we possibly love one another as Jesus loved us? Who can measure up to love like that? I think Paul catches the vision, when he offers this text for our encouragement: "Bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ." As part of his body, we may each learn to carry the problems of another, and thus together carry the burdens of all. Our seasoned and new Stephen Ministers have caught a vision of this way, and have declared themselves willing to search it out.

People *have* burdens. All of us carry burdens at one time or another. And some people, as I've said, carry grief and sorrows, alone. Most of us have friends and relatives who are supportive when we're going through a difficult time and this is wonderful. However, there are often feelings way down deep inside which we would rather not share, even with a close friend or family member. Unfortunately, people who want to help aren't always the best of listeners, and instead of listening, they sing songs to a heavy heart. A Stephen Minister is one who has learned certain skills so as to be able to be a friend in need, not to "fix" the burden, but to help lift it.

In a disciplined, trained and organized manner, our Stephen Ministers do what Christians are called to do. Stephen Ministers care for people who are grieving, for people who have been betrayed or who have

been let down by others or by life. They help people who have made poor choices to consider more carefully the decisions they must now make. Stephen Ministers care for people whose spouses won't seek help and for those whose spouses need all their help. They care for people before and after surgery, before and after marriage, before and after childbirth, before, during and after divorce. Stephen Ministers care for those who will recover soon, for those who suffer chronic problems, and for those who teeter painfully between health and illness. They show God's love to those who are dying and to those who are changing so much they feel as though they are in the midst of a new birth.

Are you getting the idea of what Stephen Ministry is? It's an extension of Westminster's pastoral ministry that fulfills and multiplies hands and hearts within the body of Christ. A Stephen Minister does not take the place of the pastoral relationship you have with Sandy, John, Laurie, Nancy or me, but enhances it.

Stephen Ministers are not advice givers; they are not trained for that. They may help you seek out advice. More likely, they will help you work through to your own decision, which is how decisions really need to be made anyway. Perhaps you're thinking to yourself, "She has spoken about a burden I have not been able to share. Could I do so, now?" I certainly hope so!

