

My first call as a pastor was in the Eastern North Dakota Synod. The bishop throughout my call there was Bishop Terry Brandt. And the first time that I spoke with Bishop Terry was when he called me one evening to let me know I had been assigned to that synod. I'll never forget it because the conversation started with something along the lines of, "I hope you're excited about coming to North Dakota because I've already had a few people start crying when they saw my number pop up."

Bishop Terry taught me a lot about being a pastor. But even more importantly, he taught me a lot about what it means to live and love as a person of faith. After going through the logistics and next steps, he scheduled a time to come to St. Paul, Minnesota so that he could take Lauren and me out to dinner and get to know us better. The day we moved to North Dakota, he called us later that evening to ask how we were doing and see if we needed anything. And when our first daughter was born, we asked if he would be available to preside at her baptism. His office administrator told us that he was pretty booked out and wouldn't be available for some time. Less than 10 minutes later, I got a call from Bishop Terry saying that he moved his schedule around because the baptism of our daughter was far more important to him.

But what I hold onto more than any of these moments, is a towel. This towel. Now, there's nothing particularly special about this towel – it's just a towel. It was probably purchased at Target or Wal-Mart. Anyone who comes into my office probably hasn't noticed it or if they have, probably doesn't give it much thought. And I don't blame anyone because pastors have a lot of weird things. But everyone who was ever new to the synod – either by ordination or by changing calls – was given a towel just like this from Bishop Terry.

Every year, twice a year, we would welcome anyone who was new to the synod at either the Synod Assembly or the Fall Theological Conference. Anyone who was new would be called to the front where we would sit on a chair. After taking some time to introduce ourselves, Bishop Terry came to the front with a large basin of water. Kneeling before each person, he would wash our feet and as he washed our feet, he said, "Jesus said, 'I have set an example for you, that you should go and do as I have done to you. For servants are not greater than their master.'" Then he gave us all a very personalized blessing, naming each of us and our family members. That's where my towel came from. That's when this towel became more than just a towel.

Now I know this story might give you Maundy Thursday vibes, but that's okay because we can't hear today's Gospel reading without

acknowledging that these words of Jesus take place in the same scene as when he washed the disciples' feet. It's a continuation of that moment. Which means that when Jesus tells his disciples to love one another, it comes in the context of their leader having just washed their feet. And that paints a pretty good picture for how Jesus understands love. The love that you and I are called to live out looks like one who washes feet.

And that's important to keep in mind because love is what I would call a numb word today. It's a word we use all the time and we assume we know what it means, and yet, we also know that different people mean different things when they say love. Sometimes it's a feeling – like the actual warm fuzzies you get when you're around someone. Sometimes it's what brings you happiness – like playing a sport or singing your favorite songs in the car or even taking that bite of your favorite food. Sometimes it's about self-esteem – how we feel about ourselves and what we have done in our lives.

But rarely in today's world do we think of love in terms of service, sacrifice, and humility. I mean we tend to expect others to endear themselves to us first. Isn't it up to the other person to prove themselves worthy of love? Don't we have to learn to love ourselves first? And if they don't return our love or if they aren't changed for the better by our love, then isn't that just a waste of time and energy? Love becomes a commodity, one that is only given when the expectations match the cost.

This isn't the love that Jesus calls his disciples to live out. This isn't the kind of love that Jesus has for you and me. Because if it was, we'd have no hope. If that were the case, then who would ever have been worthy of having their feet washed? And yet... And yet, the disciples are washed. Even Peter is washed. Even Thomas. Even Judas. The love that Jesus has for each of us, the love that we are called to share with the world, is a love that blooms from seeing another for all their goodness and imperfections, and loving them still. It's about seeing beyond ourselves into the life of another whom Jesus was willing to die for. It's about knowing what we have and who we are is enough to stand beside, walk with, and serve another of God's beloved.

Pass towels

To others, a towel might not seem like much. But something as simple as a towel can be enough to help us remember how loved we truly are. Sometimes a simple object can remind us of our deepest calling and purpose. Sometimes, the littlest ways we love mean the most to those we love. For Jesus said, "I have set for you an example, that you should go and love others as I have loved you." Amen.