

## McCabe United Methodist Church

Lent, 2016: "Cross My Heart, Cont'd" (w The 5 Love Languages)

### ***When Actions Do Speak Louder Than Words: "Acts of Service"***

Sermon on John 13:1-15, 33-35,  
theme Scripture: Galatians 5:13-18, 22-25 (03/12 & 03/13/16)  
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I don't know about you, but my *feet* start to get antsy around this time of year. As I was getting ready for work the other morning, I made a point to check the temperature outside...and not because I was wondering how heavy a sweater or jacket I should wear – no: I checked the temperature outside because I wanted to know if the day was sandal-appropriate.

When the weather app on my phone revealed it was only 30 degrees, I decided it was *not*, in fact, sandal-appropriate, so I put on socks and warm boots. When I left work later in the day, however, I found myself longing to free my feet from their warm constraints. I am happiest and most comfortable when my feet can get fresh air...so they get antsy after months of winter footwear.

I *love* no-socks, sandal-appropriate weather. It makes my heart – and my feet – very happy. But, let's be honest: no-socks, sandal-appropriate weather tends to bring out the worst in our feet...especially when we find ourselves in sandals, walking on dusty or dirty pathways.

I have lived through many a sandal-wearing day only to come home at the end of it feeling the need to wash my feet before doing anything – either because they were so dirty, so smelly, or both. Well, this is exactly the kind of thing we need to keep in mind in order to understand the significance of what happens in our reading from chapter 13 of John's Gospel.

As our reading indicates, not long before Jesus' trial and his death on the cross, he had a meal with his closest disciples. During this meal, Jesus was fully aware his time on earth was drawing to a close, so he made sure to teach a critically important lesson the night of that meal.

Before they had all finished eating, Jesus did something unusual: he got up, put water into a large basin, and proceeded to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with a towel he had wrapped around his waist.

Now, the act of foot washing itself was not unusual. In fact, it was incredibly common.

At that time, and in that region of the world, it was an act of simple hospitality to wash the feet of your guests when they entered your house. After all, they would have been walking around outside on dusty roads littered with animal waste...wearing sandals.

If you wanted your house to remain as tidy as possible, you washed the feet of your guests as they entered your home. Not only did it help keep your house tidy, it would have also served as a simple kindness for those with tired feet.

However, the one washing guests' feet was typically a household servant...*not* the host or the master himself. Though it needed to be done, it was normally too “dirty” a job for the host. When Jesus washed his disciples' feet, he was flipping the order of things.

Jesus was *a/ways* master and host when he was alone with his disciples... yet, just before he was arrested, put on trial, and executed, he made sure his disciples learned that, in God's kingdom, no act of servanthood is “too lowly”. Even Jesus Christ himself – God's beloved Son, our supreme Master and Host – got down on his hands and knees to wash his disciples' feet.

When Jesus told his disciples to love one another as he had loved them, *this* is the kind of love he meant: love that is willing to do even the “lowliest” acts of service. What an appropriate reminder for us as we get ever closer to Good Friday.

This weekend marks the 5<sup>th</sup> weekend of the church season of Lent, the 40-day season during which we walk with Jesus – God's Son, God's very heart – toward the cross of Good Friday and the empty tomb of Easter Sunday. Lent is a season during which we reflect on the sin that

lurks in our own hearts and minds...a season when we ask God to help us grow *beyond* our sin so love can abound.

Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ surrendered himself in love and service to the world...which is why it makes so much sense to look at Lent through the lens of *The Five Love Languages* – because the five love languages, as a concept, are about letting *love* be the driving force in our lives.

*The 5 Love Languages* were developed as a concept by Christian counselor Dr. Gary Chapman. After years as a marriage and family therapist, Dr. Chapman noticed that people seemed to give and receive love through five primary “languages.”

*Words of Affirmation. Quality Time. Physical Touch. Gifts. And Acts of Service.* Whether we realize it or not, each of us receives and offers love in these five ways – and one or two of them tend to be the ways in which we receive and offer love *best* and most *naturally*.

It's worth noting these are love languages with which we communicate in *all* of our relationships: romantic, friendship, familial, collegial, you name it. No matter the relationship, love will somehow be communicated in these five ways:

*Words of Affirmation. Quality Time. Physical Touch. Gifts. And Acts of Service.*

The challenge lies in knowing how *best* to communicate love with those around us. Because, just like spoken languages, if someone communicates *love* to us in a “love language” that is not one of our own top love languages, we may not understand it as love...and vice versa.

The first week of this series, we considered Words of Affirmation. If Words of Affirmation is one of your top love languages, kind, supportive, affirming words *feel* like love to you. Three weeks ago, we looked at Quality Time. If Quality Time is a top love language for you, you crave the undivided attention of others: knowing someone is focused and attentive to you *feels* like love.

Two weeks ago we considered Physical Touch. For those who have Physical Touch as a top love language, it *feels* like love when someone is tangibly connected to you: a reassuring arm squeeze, sitting close together, holding hands, hugs, etc.

Last week we looked at the love language of receiving Gifts. If receiving gifts is a top love language for you, you experience love when you are given a tangible object – a token, big or small – that communicates someone was thinking of you...someone cares. The object is, as Dr. Chapman says, a “visual [symbol] of love.”<sup>1</sup>

Back in week one of this series, I made the point in my sermon that the phrase “actions speak louder than words” does not apply to those for whom Words of Affirmation is a top love language. This is so true. My husband, Derrick, made this point back when I was thinking about my sermon for that first week of this series.

Words of Affirmation is my top love language and, when Derrick mentioned the phrase, “actions speak louder than words,” he was making a joke that, for me – and for others who have Words of Affirmation as a top love language – the oh-so-popular phrase simply doesn't apply. And he's so right. If you need kind, affirming words to feel well-loved, actions simply aren't as important.

But...today: *today* is the day when that oh-so-popular phrase *does* apply. Because today's particular love language of focus is *entirely* about actions – and just how loudly they speak love.

In this, our 5<sup>th</sup> and final week of our Love Languages series, we are reflecting on the only remaining love language: Acts of Service.

Household-related chores are obvious acts of service: cooking a meal, taking care of the dishes, cleaning floors, doing necessary shopping, maintaining vehicles, tending to yard work, making beds, feeding and walking the dog, changing diapers, driving kids to and from events, making sure bills get paid, etc.

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<sup>1</sup> Gary Chapman in *The Five Love Languages: Singles Edition*. 59.

According to Dr. Chapman, such actions “require thought, planning, time, effort, and energy. If done with a positive spirit, they are indeed expressions of love.”<sup>2</sup> That last bit is so important: “if done with a positive spirit, [such acts of service] are indeed expressions of love.”

Though I don't know for certain, I'm quite sure acts of service is a top love language for my mother:

If I'm with my mom and I willingly take care of a household-related task on her “to do” list – without her prompting, of course – she visibly lights up when she discovers it's been done. Clean the kitchen and get dinner started while she's out running errands? That's a sure-fire way to receive a grateful hug and the words, “You're an *angel*,” when she walks through the front door!

Until my mom retired a few years ago, both of my parents had worked full - time outside the home throughout their marriage, so they developed a system for whose job it was to take care of which household tasks: Mom has been the primary cook, shopper, vacuumer, and duster...while Dad takes care of dishes, laundry, bathrooms, and outdoor stuff.

For the most part, I've never noticed my parents getting resentful over their particular tasks and what the other does or does not do.

The best-case scenario for any household, place of employment, church, or other non-profit organization, is that the people who are part of those places willingly and joyfully “do their part” to take care of the tasks that need to be done in order to keep the place running.

That said, it's actually quite fitting that this weekend is the first weekend we have a section of our bulletin announcements dedicated to opportunities in our Servant Ministries. While we have a lot of wonderful, dedicated, paid staff here at McCabe, those of us on staff could *not* do our jobs well without the time, energy, and effort of *unpaid* volunteers.

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<sup>2</sup> Gary Chapman. *The 5 Love Languages: The Secret to Love That Lasts*. 92.

Time, energy, and effort are valuable commodities. Here at the church, we are beyond grateful when people joyfully volunteer their time, energy, and effort to assist with things like bulletin and newsletter preparation, ushering and greeting, taking care of the sound system during worship, helping with coffee, donuts, and meals...

not to mention leading classes for children and adults, signing up to deliver Meals on Wheels, putting together care packages for college students, working with our SAY Yes after school program, giving time to chaperone youth events, offering musical gifts to bless our worship services – I could go on and on and on!

The mission of The United Methodist Church is “to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world” ...and this mission very often emerges in visible ways through this weekend's love language of focus: so often the mission of the Church is fulfilled through Acts of Service. And what better Scripture to connect with this love language than the story of Jesus washing his disciples' feet?

Late this week, I was perusing Facebook and the perfect illustration for this weekend's message appeared on my feed. Someone I know through a clergy group posted the video of a short scene from a 1993 episode of *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*.<sup>3</sup>

The scene features Mr. Rogers and his neighborhood police officer – Officer Francois Clemmons – taking a break at the end of a long, hot day.

The two men are each wearing their particular costumes from the show: Officer Clemmons in his police officer uniform and Mr. Rogers in long pants topped with one of his signature cardigan sweaters. They are sitting side-by-side while their feet are soaking in a kiddie pool.

Now, if you ever watched *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*, you know every scene included a life lesson of some sort: this particular scene has a primary lesson *and* it has a powerful secondary lesson.

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<sup>3</sup> The scene can be viewed at <https://vimeo.com/141427439/>.

The primary lesson is the subject matter of the conversation between the two men – a conversation about how there are many ways to say “I love you.” In fact, the scene features the two men singing a short song called “Many Ways to Say I Love You.”

(This, of course, is why the scene seemed so perfect for reference during the last message of our Love Languages sermon series!)

The powerful *secondary* message of the scene is that the two men are different races: Mr. Rogers is white and Officer Clemmons is black.

The scene my friend posted the other day was a clip from 1993. In 1993, a white man and a black man soaking their feet together in a pool would not have seemed like all *that* big of a deal. That said, there are still plenty of folks today who think less of people in certain racial groups. It isn't loving, it isn't fair, but it's true.

At any rate, the *Mr. Rogers'* clip from 1993 that I saw the other day actually reprised a scene from an episode recorded back in 1969...and, in 1969, it would have been pretty shocking for a children's television show to portray a white man and a black man relaxing together and allowing their feet to co-mingle in a pool of water.

The song they sing in the scene is so great: “There are many ways to say I love you. There are many ways to say I care about you... There's the singing way to say I love you. There's the singing something someone really likes to hear ... Cleaning up a room can say I love you. Hanging up your coat before you're asked to do it ... You'll find many ways to say I love you.”

This little ditty is so perfect as a representation of today's love language of focus: Acts of Service. I especially like the lines about how “cleaning up a room” and “hanging up your coat before you're asked to do it” can say “I love you.” Those fit the Acts of Service bill to a T! So the overall message of this scene from *Mr. Rogers'* is exactly the message of the love language Acts of Service.

More than that, however, the visual message of the scene is exactly the message of today's Gospel reading from John 13 ...because, not only are the two men soaking their feet together in a pool – despite their racial differences – but, when Officer Clemmons begins to exit the pool, Mr. Rogers helps him dry his feet.

In a nearly literal way, Mr. Rogers performs a foot washing in this precious scene...and, in doing so, he offers an example of Christian love and service that is precisely in line with Jesus' challenge to his disciples in John 13.

When reflecting on story in John 13, keep in mind that Jesus even washed the feet of Judas and Peter: Judas, whom Jesus knew was about to betray him...and Peter, whom Jesus knew was about to deny knowing him.

In other places in the Gospels, Jesus taught his disciples to love their enemies and to pray for those who treat them badly...well, Jesus did just that in the scene from John 13. Offering an act of humble service to those who would betray and deny him is a kind of holy love so often I can only imagine living.

Yet such love remains one of the greatest challenges of Christian faith and life.

As we walk ever closer to the cross of Good Friday, may we grow in our love for our loving God – the God's whose love was poured out for us and exemplified for us through Jesus' acts of humble servanthood.

May we grow in our love for our loving God ...and may we respond to God's great love by growing in the way we share love in this world.