

Homily (Maundy Thursday)

by Stewart Ruch

To live a life of service without burning out, prioritize bonding with the Lord, being slow to self-protect, and refusing to self-position.

Duration: 31:06

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, Matthew 11:28-30, Matthew 20:26-28, Mark 6:31, Luke 22:15, Luke 22:27, John 13:4-5

Topics: "Homily"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the importance of bonding with the Lord in order to serve others effectively. He shares his personal experience of gathering friends to pray and bond with the Lord on Saturday nights, even when he feels tired. The speaker emphasizes that before we can serve, we need to first bond with Jesus and other followers of Him. He also highlights the example of Jesus, who was slow to self-protect and refused to self-position, showing us the true heart of service.

Transcript

This is Church of the Resurrection in Wheaton, Illinois. Today's sermon is by Bishop Stuart Ruck and is from Maundy Thursday, 2018. It is not uncommon within Christian circles, but also within many other circles that may not necessarily be overtly religious, to hear the phrase and to hear about people who are experiencing what's often called burnout.

That phrase actually originated, as best as those who study these things can tell, back in the 1970s. An American psychologist coined the phrase burnout. It's a phrase that I don't remember hearing much in the 70s and 80s, but I remember in the 90s beginning to hear a great deal more of people being burned out, people describing, I've hit a wall, I'm burning out.

But I must say in the last five years, it was simply my anecdotal experience that I have never heard the phrase used more often. I've never heard of more people in different situations in life, family life, work life, church life, experiencing what's often described as burnout. Clinicians who study these things actually have a hard time exactly describing what is burnout.

They've amassed at least three characteristics. One is a perpetual exhaustion. Two is a cynicism or detachment about the work you once loved, but now feel angry about or disconnected from.

And three, a significant drop in job performance. It's real. Burnout is real.

It's serious. So we have this reality here, this reality of burnout, a psychological reality, an emotional reality, a physical reality. Come over here.

Then we have our Lord who says, I am among you as one who serves. As a matter of fact, if you want to seek after fullness or greatness in the kingdom of God, then I call you to become one who serves. He will then live out, after he teaches that, the actual washing of his followers' feet in an utter role of servanthood.

He wants to be very clear. You want to understand your life as a follower of Jesus. You understand your life in many ways, in a kind of primary way, in a very profound descriptive way, as a servant life.

So here comes the question, and I think it's a really important question, that we're going to take Jesus' teaching and his modeling and what he did on the last night with his followers on earth, when he could have given them so many commandments, he could have given them so many callings, so many purposes. He says, become as one who serves. How do we live a life of service, and yet how do we not burn out? How can we? For the Lord does not want burned-out servants.

That's not his goal for you. And yet the fact of the matter is, the Christian life will often require significant exertion. The Apostle Paul himself described his life of service, and we can allow that indeed the Apostle Paul had something of an extreme life, but I would be concerned, lest we detach ourselves too much from his life, thinking that he is utterly and completely anomalous.

He is not. He said, to be clear with you, I've been beaten five times with 39 lashes, three different times with rods. I've been shipwrecked three times.

I've been stoned with people throwing and hurling rocks at me once. I suffer regular insomnia. I often go hungry, and I deal with constant realities of being cold, a significant life of exertion.

1900 years later, in the mid-20th century, one of my heroes, a woman named Gladys Aylward, would, as a British missionary to China, call to love the Chinese people and to share Jesus with them, would find that as an invading force came into China, she had no choice but to take a hundred of the orphans who she was already serving and guide these hundred orphans with immense exertion through the mountains to a safe place where they could be kept. How do we square these pictures of servanthood, of giving up our lives, with the reality and the fear that I think many of us have here at resurrection of burning out? Indeed, I think many of you are in a quandary when you hear the call to serve, because this church has a servant heart. I would say that's one of our characteristics.

We ask you to serve, and you step forward. We ask you to give of yourself generously, financially, and in your time, and you seek to do so. And yet, I know that for many of you there's this nagging concern, but if I completely served, or if I'm not careful, then I may be like those who burn out.

Or perhaps you have served and burned out. Indeed, many come to resurrection because they tell me, I'm burnt out, so I'm here. So how do we serve and not burn out? Let us go together to the Scriptures.

Let us go together to Jesus, who himself gave of himself entirely with great abandon on the night when Jesus gives us Holy Communion, the Eucharist, bonding with him. It is here that we are bonded with the Lord Jesus and all of who he is on this night when he gives us Holy Communion, holy bonding. So he also washes our feet and teaches us how to serve.

So how do we serve? We see that Jesus invites us to a bonding, what I might call a Sabbath bonding. I'll explain that more in a moment. Second, Jesus is slow to self-protect.

That may seem completely contrary to what I'm saying about not burning out. I'll explain it. But Jesus invites us to a bonding, and Jesus is slow to self-protect.

And third, Jesus refuses to self-position. And we will find that in this bonding, and in our own slowness to self-protect, and in our own refusal to self-position, it is there that we'll find the power to serve. Indeed, we will find there the heart of service.

Yes, service involves cleaning up after things, absolutely. Service involves setting things up, absolutely. But that isn't the heart of service.

The heart of service is a freedom to be slow to self-protect and a refusal to self-position. But it starts with a proper bonding. Look at verse 15 with me there in your bulletins.

And when the hour had come, He reclined at table. He's in the position of one who's hosting. He's gathering those He loves.

The apostles were with Him. Those were His followers. And He says to them this, I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer.

Jesus invites us with Him, to Him. This is a kind of feast with the Lord Jesus. It's a kind of Sabbath, which is an understanding that's given us from the Hebrew Scriptures and the Hebrew people where they were called to bond with the Lord, to keep a Sabbath day, a bonding day.

It's called a day of rest, but it's easy for us to translate the understanding of Sabbath and rest as a breaking off. Indeed, we use the vernacular as Americans take a break. That's fine.

It's not a bad vernacular to use. But Sabbath has a lot more to do with bonding than it has to do with breaking. For many of us, we think about breaking or Sabbath or rest as detaching, as a kind of live streaming of whatever it is that we're interested in, a Netflix one after the other, which in itself, in moderation, is not a bad thing.

But that will not give you what you need to serve. It may give you some refreshment, but it will not restore you deeply. What Jesus is saying is, with me here, bond with me here, for it is here that you will receive what you need to serve.

The Sabbath feast, the Passover feast, the feast He is calling them to, is a feast of bonding, not breaking, not disconnecting. It's a communion. The last year has been a learning for me in this.

I'm in one of the professions that psychologists say most often leads to burnout. And I've been learning how is it that you maintain the call to love others and serve others over a long period of time, and certainly keeping regular times, weekly times of Sabbath, of connecting with the Lord, of recreation and of rest, has been absolutely critical for me in my call to serve. But God's called me to something else, and it's just happened in the last 10 months, where on a Saturday night, if you're a pastor, you are, first of all, you are no fun on a Saturday night.

So your children will tell anyone, if they're honest, around 6 or 7 o'clock on a Saturday night, pastor dad is not as much fun. And he starts moving toward a focus. He's getting focused.

He may be helping do the dishes. He may be clearing up. But around 8.30 to 9, I disappear.

I'm in bed. I'm going to bed. I'm getting up early.

I got everything set out ahead of time. I'm a little OCD about that. It's all set up.

It's all ready. There are my shoes. There are my trousers.

There are my collar. I don't want to forget it. Don't forget my cross.

Okay, set up a set at a time. In bed by 9, up by 5, ready to go. And I've kind of viewed it like, okay, it's like being ready for a race.

It's like being ready for, I got to be on. I've done that for years, 20 years. And so the Lord said to me this year, why don't you ever pray more on a Saturday night? And I said, Lord, how can you ask me to pray more? I'm getting, I'll be praying tomorrow.

I've got to preach. And Lord, are you going to push me and press me? He said, well, why don't you, come to us and pray late. I'm like, pray late? He said, depress me.

No, come and pray late. So I came one night by myself with the goal of praying late. I was out in an hour, asleep, just cold asleep.

Jeff Sheehan, our sexton, found me. I hope he thought that I was in profound prayer and that when I pray, I breathe like this. Okay.

So I drove home and said, that wasn't very good, Lord. Why did you tell me to do that? That wasn't exciting. It wasn't engaging.

I felt more tired than I was. But I realized, no, what I had to do was gather some friends, gather some of those who want to pray with me. Come on a Saturday night when everything in me says I'd rather stay home, read a book, decompress, be ready to go, and bond with the Lord.

So I've been doing that throughout this year. Every other Saturday night or so. Because I'm convinced that actually I'll have what I need to serve if I do more bonding with the Lord and less seeking the control and manage my own life.

That's my deal. And not every pastor should do that. That's just what God's asked me to do.

What's your deal? How do you bond with the Lord regularly? Because he would not call you to serve as he calls all of us to serve until he first says, come, eat with me. This is my body. This is my blood.

Bond with me. Bond with other followers of me. How are you doing that? He invites us to a bonding.

Second, we see that our Lord Jesus is slow to self-protect and would call us to do the same. I want to explain this because, again, that may seem counterintuitive. That if we're going to serve, we have to protect all of our time and protect all of our energy so that we can serve.

I want to argue that I think the opposite is actually true. Let's look at the Lord Jesus again. We read that he takes the bread, he takes the cup, verse 19 and 20.

And then look at verse 21. I've Here's our Lord in one of the most profound, intimate moments of all time where he will institute the giving of his body and blood. He will institute Holy Communion, where he will give the gift of himself.

And it is here, intertwined in this very event, when our Lord is at the height of his service, he's also at the height of being betrayed. That our Lord Jesus himself has refused to protect himself from those who will betray him. There will be one key betrayer, Judas, but there will be scores of his disciples who will betray him on that night.

Even the leader of the disciples will betray him on that night. And he has let them in. He has invited them in.

He has called them to his table. He's even said to him, come with me. I desire to be with you.

Do you see how our Lord opens himself up? Even on the hour in which he would give of himself, he opens himself. He loves freely. Our Lord is slow to self-protect.

He loves us so much he gives himself, his body given, his blood poured out. As a matter of fact, this would become intertwined in our liturgy, in how we would pray about what our Lord has done. Paul says this in 1 Corinthians 11, on the night he was betrayed, he took bread.

Betrayal is one of the most excruciating interpersonal experiences that we can ever, ever encounter. Because it's only those who we've loved deeply, it's only those who we've trusted, who have the power to betray us. But are the core ways that Jesus serves? Oh yes, he washes his disciples feet.

It's beautiful and important and powerful. But behind the washing of his feet is the refusal to protect himself. The refusal to manage his life in such a way that he will never get hurt again.

But instead, the willing of himself to love others even when they will hurt him. One of the core ways Jesus serves us is by giving himself to us, by loving us to the end. And that's the heart of how we serve others.

Okay, a caveat and then a clarity. A caveat. I'm not saying that there aren't times in your life when you need to be protected.

I'm not saying that. If you're going, I'm getting uncomfortable here. First of all, you probably need to be a little bit uncomfortable because this is uncomfortable.

I mean, he left betrayers at his table. But I do want to be clear about something. There is need for protection in our lives.

And particularly if you come out of a background where there was a violation of your body or your mind or your person. It happened in a church. It happened in your family.

It happened in the workplace. There is need for proper protection. I want to be clear about that.

That should be discerned with others and carefully worked through. That's why I would say we need to be slow to self-protect. There may be times indeed where there should be self-protection.

But my concern is that what I see happening among many of us culturally is that we're quick to self-protect. That we're quick to say, my time, my day, my rhythms. And in doing so, we actually detach

ourselves from the Lord, from one another, from the life of the church whereby we get the very strength we need.

There are times when you need to self-protect. But be slow to self-protect. Be discerning when indeed there is that time that you should do so and then do so.

But is it possible, a clarity now following a caveat, that an imbalanced self-protection actually exhausts us more than restores us? Because in doing so, we remove ourselves from the Lord, from His people, from those who actually are there to love us and care for us. I have seen this here probably a couple of a dozen times where somebody has come here and they've been violated in some way. Many have come here and they've been very hurt by a church leader.

And it's real. They were really hurt by a church leader. They weren't making it up.

They weren't imagining it. Of course, I would never use your name, but I've watched you. I've seen you.

I've seen you refuse to utterly and completely protect yourself by slowly coming into the community, taking time to see if it's a trustworthy place, taking time to see if there are people of integrity that are here. You should do all those things. But then all of a sudden, I'll see you passing out bulletins or I'll see you preparing Holy Communion.

Then I'll see you being trained as a prayer minister. I'll see you getting up and preaching. That's what I'm talking about.

That's serving. That's a deep way in which we serve. We are called to love so freely and so closely that indeed, we may get hurt.

And that may be one of the ways in which we are serving. Finally, Jesus refuses to self-position. A dispute arises among them, verse 24, as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest.

There's a kind of craving for positional greatness. It's a desperation. It's an absolute obsession or angling or full ambition for a particular job position or a certain title or just an employment status, a degree earned or perhaps just some level of fame that you're certainly deserving of and finally comes your way.

You imagine yourself in that job, going off to that job or coming home from that job and just feeling great. You imagine your email signature with the degree letters behind it or the title in front of your name. You imagine yourself trying to deal with the pressures of fame.

It would be hard, you think you say to yourself, but I'd be famous. You see yourself being interviewed by another famous blogger and breezily answering their questions as if it's one of several interviews that day. Or maybe your self-esteem isn't such that you angle for positional greatness.

Maybe you're like some of the disciples who are just talking about who else is great. Maybe you say, I don't want positional greatness, but I'm obsessed with who gets it and I envy them or I resent them or I find them unimportant, but I think about them all the time. Note that in verse 24, it's not just seeking position for yourself, it's being obsessed about who else gets the position.

Jesus gives us a simple remedy here, verse 26, but not so with you. I don't think it has to be complicated. Refuse it.

Refuse your craving for position, title, degree. Realize that yes, you serve with Jesus, bonded with Him, willing to give of yourself as He gave of Himself, but you also serve for Jesus. You serve for Him.

Position, title, degrees, they are not intrinsically a problem. Indeed, they may help you to do the servant work that God has called you to do, but it's the craving of it, it's the great need for it that our Lord says will actually get in the way of your service. I love the story of a man named Ambrose, a great leader in the church in the 4th century, a great bishop who actually helped to bring one called Augustine, who had become one of the great theologians of the church, to the Lord.

They were electing a new bishop in the city of Milan in Italy. Ambrose was a civic leader, but he knew that the election was going to be contentious, so he went to make sure he could help keep the peace. They can't decide who's supposed to be the bishop, and legend holds, history isn't sure, that a child cried out at one point, let Ambrose be the bishop.

And it caught fire, and everyone went, yeah, Ambrose, Ambrose should be the bishop. Let's get Ambrose to be the bishop. He's never wanted this job anyway.

As a matter of fact, as they found out later, he wasn't even baptized. He wasn't a deacon, he wasn't a priest, but let Ambrose be the bishop. And they literally, within a week, baptized the man, ordained him a deacon, a priest, and then they made him a bishop.

He went on to be one of the great bishops of all time, teaching the gospel with incredible fervency, but he in no way sought that position. Do you know that God will get you the degree you need? Do you know that God will get you the position that you need? Do you know the Lord will get you to the place that you need to be if your heart is consumed with serving Him, if you realize it is for Him and from Him that you're serving? Let me conclude with this. It may be that you're actually, you have a place of freedom to give of yourself.

You're free to protect in the right ways, but not to protect in an imbalanced way. It may be that you don't want positional greatness. Maybe you've just gotten old enough and you're tired and you don't need that anymore.

There's another kind of greatness that Jesus talks about people going for. It's not positional greatness, it's interpersonal greatness. It's the kind of greatness that would come under the table, if you will, whereby you don't have a position and you're not seen craving one, but you're craving the honor of others.

Indeed, Jesus says, the kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority, and it could be translated different than the way your translation has it, those in authority call themselves benefactors. What Jesus is saying is that there are those who may not have seek positions of greatness by title, but what they do is they want to be called benefactors. They will serve, this is for the rich people who would give to impoverished people in cities, but in giving and in serving, they want to be called benefactors.

This is under the table. This is whereby you go, look, here's how it goes. I won't seek greatness.

I won't want this. I'm going to serve my heart out, but you better call me benefactor. And I'm going to fantasize about all those people rising up and calling me benefactor.

All those people honoring me for how amazing I am. Let me say this. I know a ton of mature Christians.

I don't know anyone who doesn't struggle with that one. They might get beyond the position of greatness. They may have the freedom to give of themselves, but they're all craving.

I'm craving. Call me benefactor. That's what I'll still hold on to.

Jesus knows the human heart. He knows that there may be those who want position of greatness, but there are those who want an interpersonal greatness. But when you still want that, it's still payment.

You still expect a transaction to occur. Let me be clear. It's important that those who lead and that those who diminish together affirm one another constantly.

It's very important. It's very important to honor one another. And when you see a strength in somebody to thank God for it and to articulate it and to name it, that's extremely important.

It's very important that we are giving that. It's also very important that we get free from having to have it in certain ways from certain people at certain times because it can actually hinder our service. And then Jesus says, on this night when I give myself, I will not be called benefactor.

I will be called betrayed. On this night when I give myself, I will not be understood as Messiah. I'll be seen as common zealot rising up against Rome.

I'll have no position of greatness. I won't self-protect. The heart of service, indeed the strength to serve, comes from these places of bonding, being slow to defend ourselves and protect, refusing position.

We're going to have a chance to wash one another's feet. It's a ceremonial action, but it might be a way for you, maybe after a time of burnout, maybe in the midst of fear of burnout, maybe realizing that you've built so many protective walls around yourself that you're not able to serve, to come forward and receive from the Lord as you give to the Lord. Let me just say with the foot washing, if you're not comfortable doing it, it's really okay.

You don't have to, and no one will look down on you for not doing it. Don't worry about it. You're welcome to, and you're all invited to, but I don't want anyone to get worked up or feel uncomfortable about this.

It's not worth it. I want you to serve. I want you to be free to bond with the Lord so you can wash one another's feet.

A second way that you may be free to serve in new ways or renewed to serve after a tough season is that during Holy Communion, Catherine and I and a few other prayer ministers will be up here at the altar. So if you would like to receive prayer here where we bond with the Lord for your servant's ministry, we would like to pray for you. Maybe it's a renewing of a servant ministry that you feel stirred to.

Now, I don't expect everyone to come up here, and if you don't come up here, not that we'll think you don't have a servant heart, okay? It's just maybe the God's doing something new in your heart tonight. There's a quickening of the heart or a conviction. I want to be renewed in my servant call.

I want to bond with the Lord and trust Him to give me what I need in that Sabbath. If you would like to do that, just come up these stairs here, and we'll just pray for folks right here for a few songs during Holy Communion. Father in heaven, we commit our lives to you.

Bond us now with the Lord Jesus as we serve one another, and we pray this in Jesus's name. Amen. 1
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