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**Congregational Sermon
Synod Assembly Weekend**

**May 6-7, 2017**

**Gospel Text: John 13: 1-17**

**Preacher: Deacon Ro Fesser**

Grace and peace to you all: the Rocky Mountain Synod, Congregations of the ELCA in Wyoming, Utah, Texas, New Mexico and Colorado, and any guests who may be joining us for worship this morning. Graceand peace from God, our Almighty and Loving Creator, from our Risen Savior, Jesus, the Christ, and from the Wise Voice in our hearts and heads, the Holy Spirit! Amen!!!!

It’s very special to be here with everyone who hears these words this morning, whether in person, by video, or by someone who’s reading
this sermon to the congregation. I bring you heartfelt greetings from all our neighbors and community at Eben Ezer Lutheran Care Center in Brush, on the northeastern plains of Colorado. I am Deacon Ro Fesser, or Chaplain Ro in my Eben Ezer world.

For those not in attendance at Synod Assembly:
This weekend, those in attendance at Synod Assembly are learning all about the newly titled, deacon ministry, or ministry of Word and Service. It is not a brand new idea to the ELCA, or to the history of the church. Deacon ministry began in God’s story with Stephen and Phoebe in the New Testament, caring for the widows and poor, and sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ with believers and non-believers. Lutheran Deacon ministry was started with deaconesses at Kaiserwerth Germany, in 1836, following the example of biblical Phoebe, taking care of the vagrants, sick, orphans, prisoners, or anyone in need, including church members. In 1988 and 1993, the ELCA added Associates in Ministry and Diaconal Ministers as a rostered lay service ministry. Last August, 2016 our church body made a major decision in the life of the church to bring Deaconesses, Associates in Ministry, and Diaconal Ministers under one umbrella, Ministry of Word and Service, titling us as Deacons. Notice that incredible word I used, SERVICE!!!

Everybody knows what service is, right? If you defined service, how would you write your definition? Webster has a number of definitions beginning with: service asthe occupation or function of [serving](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/serving)in active service: for example, employment as a [servant](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/servant)entering a position of service such as waitress or missionary; The next possibility: Webster writes:the work performed by one that [serves](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/serves)good service:for example to[help](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/help), [use](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/use), offer a [benefit](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/benefit); glad to be of service, as a volunteer directing or giving someone items. Webster’s third possibility:  contribution to the welfare of others, the act of serving: for example, a helpful act,did her a service, such as helping at the Food Bank. For we Christians, Webster seems a little bland, but we might take that second possibility, help, use, benefit; or the third possibility: contribution to the welfare of others. This talk about definitions most likely seems trivial, but is it, really? If you and your neighbor in your neighborhood, stood side-by-side, how would you both define service? How would you and your friend/co-worker/bleacher buddy at soccer games, each define service? How would you and your non-believer associate define service?

The real question for today’s sermon: Christians, what sets us apart in acts of service from the everyday philanthropic, the community advocate, the kind soul? Are we, as Christian servants, doing it, thinking it, daily living it out different than the fella or lady we meet on the street or who live next door to us?

 We can define Christian service, as God-pleasing service, but doesn’t everyone please God when they do service? I think so, if it contributes to the welfare of others. Let’s turn away from Webster and turn into the Bible.

The reading from Isaiah says: ‘is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin…the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am!” Oh my…this is distinctive!!! We can call out, cry for help to the Lord, in our acts of service and He says, HERE I AM!

Yes!!!Yes!! Yes!!…Yeah God!!! He will companion with us making service look a lot different. God is adamant declaring, “Here I am” three times in Isaiah, here in chapter 58, in 52:6, and in 65:1. Here I am, to help you, servants, willing even to let my glory be your rear guard. Everyone, you get that don’t you, our rear ends are covered in God’s glory? We can count on God to help us, do service…together.

 Martin Luther had a strong sense of how Christian service looks different. One of his early writings was *The Freedom of a Christian* in 1520, he wrote, “[A]s our heavenly Father has in Christ freely come to our aid, we also ought freely to help our neighbor through our body and its works, and each one should become as it were a Christ to the other that we may be Christs to one another and Christ may be the same in all, that is, that we may be truly Christians.”

Notice how Luther tells us through our body and its works, the entire thing: hands, feet, ears, heart, mind, mouth, voice, eyes and our spirit, all working together, for no other reason than to touch and heal the hearts and minds of others in Jesus Christ. Luther notes that our heavenly Father freely came to us in Jesus Christ, so we go to the other. How many of us hesitate to go to the other, hesitate to wave, hesitate to speak, hesitate to carry or hold the other’s bag or burden, especially with a stranger?

 Let’s talk some Jesus. Jesus Christ himself, displayed a much different type of service than anyone before him. Verse 1 of our Gospel reading points out, “Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.” Think about this, Jesus knew what was on the heart of Judas, betrayal. Yet Jesus serves Judas in the loving act of foot-washing. Judas had not left the Upper Room yet. Jesus made no judgment, no avoidance, just the loving act performed. As he washed the feet of Judas, Jesus knew that the Father had given all things into his hands, that he had come from God and was going to God. Jesus trusted in his relationship with His Father. And God’s glory, was his rear guard.

Jesus revealed to his disciples that loving servants, do it, acts of loving service right where they are: at dinner, in the quietest of places, at the most threatening and dangerous times, with betrayers, deniers, and deserters, and with the best of friends. Kneeling, using the simplest of tools, towel and basin, God at the rear saying Here I am, no need for pride to get in the way. Jesus was in relationship with the ones he served and in relationship with the One who created him and loved him.

The examples of faithful Christian servants line up before you through
the ages and the generations:

Deacon Stephen, full of faith and the Holy Spirit, set apart by the disciples, did it feeding and tending the Hellenistic widows who were being neglected.

Deacon Phoebe, did it as a decision-maker and minister in the church handling great responsibility, helping many people, including Paul.

Deacon Athanasius, secretary to Alexander of Alexandria, succeeding him as bishop, did it in the middle of controversy and exile, standing firm on the Nicene orthodoxy, so we might confess the Nicene Creed here today in worship.

Lay person, Philipp Melanchthon, Luther’s right hand man and colleague at the University of Wittenberg did it writing a Commentary on Romans, the Augsburg Confession, and the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, our important Lutheran Reformation documents.

Lay person, Eben Ezer’s skilled care 91-year-old neighbor, does it driving his electric wheelchair to individual rooms to sing a hymn to those he hears about at breakfast who are having a tough day.

Lay person, 100-year-old neighbor at Arbor assisted living at Eben Ezer does it leading Bible study every Friday morning and praying mightily for each person by name who lives at the Arbor daily.

Lay person, Eben Ezer’s skilled care 105-year-old neighbor does it with her gentle presence and faith in the Lord giving our young staff a listening ear and a thoughtful approach to difficulties and problems.

Brothers and sisters, Christian service is set apart…it’s doing it right where you are: in the car, at home, at work, at card club, in the neighborhood, at the grocery store, and on the street with those you meet. It’s everywhere that acts of love can be carried out in the shadow of a towel and basin, where you kneel, then stand recognizing God’s glory is your rear guard. It’s relationship with another, and with our Lord, God. Christian service is that incredible act of love lived out daily in Luther’s words, “cheerfully…[that] my God has given me in Christ all the riches of righteousness and salvation…so that from now on I need nothing except faith which believes that this is true.”

AMEN!