

Diaconal Sunday Sermon

February 22, 2026 - John 11: 1 - 44

By Brigitte McKenzie

Today is the first Sunday of Lent. Many of us will join Christians around the world in these next 40 days leading up to Easter to take time to mark Lent through various spiritual practices. The Lenten season is, for many, a time for self-reflection, for spending time to take stock of our relationship to God and to others, to recognize the fleeting nature of our lives on earth; and also, to be grateful for the gift of life, and the promise of salvation given through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. For some, Lent may include regular daily times spent in prayer, reading scripture passages or listening to devotional materials. For some, Lent is a season of making a sacrifice to give up something that one would choose to resist having or consuming, such as chocolate, coffee, alcohol, cigarettes, or perhaps resisting doom scrolling on social media. For some, regular fasting is a spiritual discipline they choose to practice during Lent. In more recent years, some have chosen to add something meaningful to their daily Lenten practices rather than taking something away from their daily lives. For some this has meant being more intentional about finding opportunities to serve others or being generous in sharing their financial or other resources, possibly by making a donation to a charity or directly helping someone in need. Perhaps, like me, you will take time to prayerfully discern how you will practice your faith through this Lenten season?

This last Sunday of February is also designated as Diaconal Sunday in our ELCIC. It is a time to acknowledge those who feel called to a public ministry of service and word, serving as deacons

in our church. Diaconal Sunday is also a time to affirm the common calling we have as the baptized servants of God. As followers of Jesus, we are invited to be active partners with God in fulfilling God's mission, for the sake of the world God so deeply loves.

In the ordination service of a deacon, (some of you were present for mine in 2018), the following words were spoken.

“Deacons have a particular calling to inspire the whole church for mission through word and service, to provide leadership in the church’s mission, to work collegially with all public ministers, communicating God’s care for all people and all creation. Deacons are equipped to create pathways for all people to participate in God’s mission, through faithful reflection of the Gospel and encouraging them to serve the common good. Deacons are empowered to serve people with the Gospel in places where church and society intersect, especially on the margins, to engage in partnerships in service of neighbour and stranger, to bring fresh ideas to the diverse communities they serve, and to continue in their own learning, formation, and growth.”

Perhaps someone listening or reading this sermon somewhere across our ELCIC is feeling a stirring in their hearts and may be wondering whether God might be calling them to serve the church and the world as a deacon?

In September, I, along with many others, watched or attended the ordination service of Bishop Larry Kochendorfer, to assume the mantle of national bishop of our ELCIC. In the service, a number of promises were read. I was especially struck by how very diaconal these words were:

“As the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada—a missional, prophetic, and diaconal church, we are called by Christ to

serve people, communities, and creation in the mission of God. The Spirit calls us to uphold the unique baptismal vocation of every person in service of God's mission, nurturing the understanding and practice of Christian faith in action. The Spirit calls us to risk-taking and new ideas, paying particular attention to those in minorities, their voices and representation. The Spirit calls us into partnerships with others in compassion for God's world and awareness of community needs. The Spirit calls us to invite into the Christian journey those who are seeking good news and liberation in the gracious promise of God in the risen Christ."

When you have the opportunity, I would encourage you to get to know Bishop Larry through his invitations to be in conversation together across the ELCIC, online via Zoom. It so happens that today he will be hosting another of these times for dialogue together.

Just a few days ago some of us attended an online Ash Wednesday service led by Pastor Linda. Others may have at least remembered it was Ash Wednesday. It is a time when we acknowledge our human shortcomings and failings in our relationship with God. In an Ash Wednesday service we confess our sins, ask for forgiveness, and are then invited to be marked with oil and a sign of the cross using ashes on our foreheads, with the spoken words "You are dust and to dust you shall return". Online, this rite was done with an ash stick or water that we gave to family members or to our own forehead as these words were spoken. It is a sombre reminder that our time on earth is fleeting. Yet, by faith, we return to our lives believing and trusting that God's steadfast love and mercy gives us a new beginning each day. We are washed clean and made whole in our relationship with God through the sacrificial life, death, and resurrection of Christ Jesus. Daily, God invites us

to renew our commitment to following Jesus in our lifelong journey of discipleship.

In recent years a United church and Anglican deacon in our city have taken the Ash Wednesday rite of anointing with oil and marking a sign of the cross on foreheads with ashes onto our city streets where many of our most vulnerable live on the boulevards and adjoining public spaces of the 900 block of Pandora. This year I was invited to join them. Many of us are familiar with the numerous services that Our Place provides to those experiencing homelessness, living with substance use addictions and/ or are living with mental illness. Amidst the tent encampments, the numerous huddles of individuals, and the occasional drug dealings, we three deacons, representing our three Christian faith denominations, offered the opportunity for passersby to pause, to engage in conversation, to ask questions, and to be given a blessing of healing and grace. The words, "You are dust and to dust you shall return" were spoken, along with the anointing of oil and a marking of a cross on the forehead. I readily confess that I felt nervous. It was uncomfortable for me. It took me out of my comfort zone to walk up to an individual huddled on the sidewalk to ask whether they would like a blessing or be anointed with ashes and oil. Many that day seemed preoccupied with gathering up their few possessions before the bylaw officers arrived to 'shush' them away. Yet, a number of individuals took advantage of our offer to give a blessing, to remind them that they are loved. But many did not. One might wonder whether there were any lasting effects from these encounters. I know this experience has left a lasting impression on me, and maybe that is the blessing of this experience: to have my heart be bruised and made more compassionate for the brokenness and suffering in the lives of others. And, for that I am grateful. I also had to remind myself that it is not for us to worry about what impact the Spirit's moving

through these encounters is. What good did it do? We will never know. Our hope on Ash Wednesday was to bring a moment of loving compassion, and light into the lives of those we met that day. And, in turn we were also richly blessed by each encounter.

Afterwards, when we deacons shared with one another what we had experienced together on the street, I heard my companions clearly state that they felt that this public ministry is a very holy expression of their diaconal ministry of service and Word, and that they are committed to offering holy communion to those living on the streets on Easter Sunday, along with chocolate eggs of course. They shared that it felt absolutely the right thing to do to be among the vulnerable, poor, and marginalized of our community sharing God's love. I am grateful to them for their ongoing ministry in service to others. This recent experience illustrates just one of the ways in which individuals called into diaconal ministry can serve as a bridge between the church and the world, bringing God's love, hope and grace to a hurting and anxious world.

This past summer, over 200 deacons, also referred to as diaconal ministers, met in Moshi, Tanzania, for the world-wide assembly of deacons that happens every four years. The days were filled with worship, dancing, singing, fellowship and opportunities to experience and learn about the diverse expressions of diaconal ministry throughout the world. Although I didn't attend, I know it was a rich and meaningful time for all. My four years serving on the board of directors of one region of World Diakonia, called DOTAC, opened my eyes to how diverse and numerous the expressions of diaconal ministry are. Yet, with all our diversity, we recognize and value that we share a common calling to public service and proclaiming God's Word.

I want to shift our thoughts to our scripture reading today, whereby we enter into the story of Jesus raising his dear friend, Lazarus,

from the dead. This chapter of John, I recently heard described as a pivotal chapter in the life and ministry of Jesus, moving from the signs and miracles of his ministry, which we have heard in the past few weeks, to that which is to come in the unfolding Passion story which we will hear and remember in the upcoming weeks. This event, the death and raising of Lazarus from the dead is a foreshadowing of Jesus' own death and resurrection, which we remember through the Lenten Season.

Jesus was on his way to Judea, despite the protests of his disciples who had recently learned of threats of stoning Jesus, were he to reappear in Judea. Despite their misgivings, Jesus was unwavering in his decision to travel to Judea once again. Upon hearing that his dear friend Lazarus was deathly sick, Jesus made a surprising decision to intentionally stay a while longer where they presently were, which was several days' walking distance from the village where Lazarus lived with his sisters, Mary and Martha. Why, one might ask, would he delay, when one would naturally assume he would want to rush to be with his close friend? Yet, Jesus took advantage of this news to use it as a 'teaching moment' to reveal God's power and glory to those present. This is startling to us, that Jesus would go to such drastic lengths to reveal himself as God's Son.

Jesus, as fully man and close friend to this family, grieved deeply when he arrived, and met Martha and Mary and others who had gathered at their home, grieving Lazarus' death. Yet, he also knew that there would be a different outcome to their grief, to those who would witness Lazarus being raised from the dead. A shocking and wonderful surprise!

Before Jesus' arrival, the home of Mary and Martha would have been filled with friends, relatives, and villagers, there to console the sisters. Hospitality was integral in Jewish life, therefore there would

have been ongoing food and refreshments offered to all, along with prayers and quiet conversations. Accompanying and supporting the grieving by the community was also an important aspect of providing support to the grieving family. Their acts of kindness, extending hospitality, being of service to the needs of the grieving we could say were all very diaconal. In listening to this story, it is striking to me how there is a theme of diaconal ministry present in the actions of Jesus, as well as in the actions of Mary, Martha, and those others who are present.

In Jesus time, the Jewish rituals around caring for the body shortly after death, anointing it with oils and herbs and wrapping the body in linen were often carried out by the women of a village. Members of the community would together carry the prepared body to a cave or to the outskirts of the village, where a communal place of burial would be. A simple service would be held, and the body would remain there until a year later, when the bones of the dead would be given a final resting place in an inset stone shelf in an ossuary.

Jesus would have been fully familiar with these Jewish practices and rituals. When he arrived and followed the villagers to the place where Lazarus' body was, he knew what was to take place. In their eyes he would have been given an opportunity to pay his respects. But, with his foreknowledge, and through his prayers to God, Jesus knew something much more profound was going to occur.

Some of you know that I live directly across from the oldest cemetery in my city, the Jewish cemetery at the top of Fernwood Road, beautifully set among huge Garry oak trees, and cared for by members of the Jewish Synagogue, the oldest active one in Canada. A number of years ago, I attended the burial service of a Jewish classmate in this cemetery. I was struck by the ways in which those gathered for the service were actively involved in the

burial, and appreciated the careful and respectful attention given by this faith community towards their dead and those grieving.

This Sunday, we recognize, begins the season of Lent, the weeks leading up to Holy Week through Easter Sunday. During the last days of Lent, you may have taken part in a Maundy Thursday worship service in the past, where we remember when Jesus humbled himself by washing the feet of his disciples and drying them with a towel. Jesus humbled himself in service to his disciples. This is a profound example of diakonia, of serving the other. When we gather in a few weeks' time for a combined Maundy Thursday/ Good Friday service we will be remembering Jesus' ministry, in his example of meeting others where they are, and, in recognizing their need, serving them. We are reminded that, in serving the other, we are fulfilling our common calling of diakonia as the baptized servants of God.

The towel and basin are widely used as symbols of diaconal ministry, although they are not the only expression of diaconal ministry. In this simple act of washing and drying of feet of one another we are reminded that the core ministry of Jesus was to be a servant of God, embodying God's love to all, and being of service to others. Jesus exemplified diakonia throughout his ministry, willingly crossing all kinds of boundaries to be with the vulnerable, the needy, the marginalized, ministering to them to restore them to life and to belonging in community with others. It cost him his life. Hear again the familiar words, *"For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him will not perish, but have eternal life."*

One of the primary roles of diaconal ministers/deacons is to support and equip the baptized in their common call of a lifelong journey of discipleship. In our baptism we are made siblings in Christ and are invited to join in God's ministry of service,

reconciliation and healing of the world. God's dream for the world, where all are able to flourish and enjoy God's shalom, of wholeness, wellness, reconciliation and peace is one we are invited to participate in and contribute to bringing it near.

One of the regular devotions I follow online is one created by Deacon Sherry Coman, through Luther Seminary in Waterloo, Ontario. In a Lutherans Connect devotional on September 24th, it focused on the work of the Holy Spirit that dwells in all things, and continually transforms us from within to become more Christlike. Deacon Sherry Colman wrote, *"The signs of our transformation are not a sudden capacity to be hearing in other languages, but how much we are ready to give of ourselves to God's work in the world."* We, the baptized, we the priesthood of all believers, are invited to be partners with God in bringing the gospel of Jesus to serve the needs of the world. This is the diakonia of God's living church.

And so, this Lenten season and every new day, may we listen for God's Spirit, to prayerfully discern what is ours to do; to be shown opportunities to be God's hands and feet and voice in this hurting and broken world. May we say Yes to the still small voice, bringing lovingkindness, hope, peace, and compassion to others. May we work collaboratively with others to right injustices, to work for truth, reconciliation and peace. May we be equipped to care for the vulnerable, the forgotten, the poor; to amplify the voices of those who have been silenced, forgotten, or disempowered to speak for themselves. May we be the church that embodies God's dream of Shalom for all by saying yes to God's invitation to serve God's world, the world God so loves.

May it be so. **Amen.**