

As we all know, some people can be quite hard to love. There are those who treat us with cruelty or wrong us or someone we love; there are those we form opinions of based on what we hear of them; or sometimes we just don't like someone for one reason or another. And sometimes even with ourselves, because perhaps of a bad self image or shame, we can have a hard time realizing how much we are loved by our Lord.

As we enter into the Triduum though and once again hear the greatest love story ever told, we will be again reminded of how the love of God has no exceptions. God meets us where we are at, and His love is unconditional. But also through the actions of our Lord at the Last Supper, we will be reminded of how we take the love that we have been given and pass it on; we serve one another. For in a world that is full of polarization, of anger, of hate; a world not too different from the world Jesus lived in, the power of love can do so much to free and liberate both us and one another.

Years ago, Elizabeth Peterson as a child was a candy striper and would volunteer at a nursing home as a middle schooler.

She remembers one day standing at the end of a long hallway in the rehab unit at the nursing home. A nurse warned her that Howard, the stroke patient in the room to the left, was cranky and rude on a good day. On a bad day, she could expect to be sworn at. Elizabeth went ahead and invited Howard to join them for their recreation program that afternoon. He replied with angry, unkind words, telling Elizabeth to never come back.

Most people might indeed never come back, but not Elizabeth. She always appreciated a challenge. Howard didn't break her heart like the sweet Mrs. Quattlebaum, who told her each day that her son would be in soon to visit; her son never came. In a place full of hard stories, end-of-life stories, stories of loss and leaving, Howard's story became a welcome relief. She didn't feel pity or sadness when she walked into Howard's room. She was livid, actually.

He was relatively young in comparison to the other residents, maybe in his early 50s or a bit younger. He had been a wealthy and successful business executive in New York City, and he had chosen a rehab center a hundred miles away so that none of his former peers could see the shell of a man

he'd become. Instead of driving in to physical and occupational therapy, he refused to go.

When Elizabeth first met Howard, she was told that he never got out of his hospital gown into his old clothes, even though the therapists and nurses urged him to. Each time she visited him in the early days, he would be in bed, in a gown, unkempt.

Elizabeth spent her summer days at the center, helping residents get to recreation programs, passing out mail, reading letters to the many residents with vision trouble, organizing an entire closet of recorded books from the local society for the blind. After she met Howard, Elizabeth decided to invite him to the recreation program every single day, regardless of his response.

Elizabeth had a grandmother who also had suffered a stroke, but she didn't have the positive prognosis that Howard had. She was angry that he was willing to throw his life away without even trying. The therapists told her again that if Howard would just come to therapy, he would recover almost all

of the functions he had lost in his stroke. So each day, Elizabeth braved Howard's verbal onslaught and invited him to do puzzles and play bingo.

As the therapists and nurses saw her persevere with Howard, they asked her to bring him to his therapy appointments. He wasn't exactly warm but he usually held back his verbal barrage and curtly told Elizabeth, "no," he did not want to go to physical therapy. One day, after many attempts, Howard finally said, "Yes."

And suddenly, slowly, there were changes. Howard started warming up to Elizabeth, telling her pieces of his story. He started shaving and getting into brightly colored tracksuits. He began to clean up after meals so that the crumbs and bits of egg no longer speckled his chin and chest. He told her about his life in New York and the shame that drove him far up the coast, away from those who knew him as a powerful man. Looking back on it from an adult perspective, she was sure that confiding in a 12-year-old candy striper was safer and easier than talking with any of the adults at the center. Perhaps that was why her persistence finally bore fruit.

Howard shared how he had never been married. He talked about his niece, whom he loved very much. He hadn't been in touch with her since his stroke. After a lot of insistence on Elizabeth's part, he dictated a letter that she happily mailed to her. Soon she was writing back and eventually making plans to visit.

Elizabeth remembered the day he was waiting for her with a new photograph resting in his hands, eager to show her the portrait his niece had sent. Howard also began to contact former friends and colleagues who had wondered where he was. The last day of her work there that summer, Howard was sitting in his wheelchair in the hallway near the nurse's station, standing out in his bright red tracksuit, cheerful and smiling and ready to greet Elizabeth when she arrived. He was no longer a prisoner in his room at the end of the hall, no longer the resident that everyone was afraid of.

Looking back, Elizabeth says she's not sure who had a greater impact on the other: her with irritating persistence asking Howard to join life again and stop wallowing in self-pity, or Howard teaching her a profound lesson - it's never too late to start again. Howard wasted months of his life after his stroke, refusing any help offered to him, ignoring the pleas of medical

professionals assuring hi that he could life, and life well, if he would work hard at his recovery. Somehow, in the face of a chubby and stubborn seventh-grader who had signed up as a volunteer in response to her own grandmother's stroke, Howard met his match and made significant changes.

Labor Day came and school started; her afternoons at the center were over for the year. When Elizabeth returned months later to visit, Howard's room had a new name on the door. The director of the recreation program told her that he had left the center, able to live on his own again. It really wasn't too late to have a fresh start.

So is it with us. Life is hard. We make bad choices. Others let us down. We suffer loss. Our sin and the sins of others make the world a tough place to live in at times. But into this world comes our Lord to set us free. To teach us if you will how to walk agian. To wash us with grace, and to invite us to do the same for one another.

It's not easy to have one's feet washed. They are not the most attractive part of our body. They smell, and we rarely let others touch them, much

less caress them. It's also not easy to wash the feet of another person. It's a real act of selfless love. And it is hard to let another show love for us when it involves the smelliest and least presentable part of our body. But Jesus was trying to teach us something in doing this.

Tonight, we celebrate the gift of the Eucharist. We consider this gift and its meaning in light of the story of Jesus' passion, death, and resurrection. We also celebrate the gift of ministry and service. This Mass offers us a lesson on what it means to give to each other.

John chapter 13 is a unique version of the Last Supper. We will not hear the words, "This is my body" or "This is my blood." Also, "Do this in memory of me" doesn't get a mention. Instead, Jesus gives us an example so that we might understand what it means to be a servant for others. The foot washing experience we will witness tonight recalls the real meaning of love, offering us a moment to refocus our own call as disciples and to witness an inspiring symbol of the meaning of the Eucharist.

The theologian Paul Tillich explains faith as "The courage to accept acceptance." This is the great gift for which must pray. The awareness of

God's love should awaken us to his inner presence where peace and joy abide. We are called to serve as Christ did—with confidence and hope.

Like Howard, we suffer too. Just as a stroke disabled his body, sin does that to us. Howard did not want to address the reality of the situation; instead he let anger and bitterness take over. And at first he did not want anyone to help him. Sometimes it's so hard to love ourselves. We make some bad choices and try to hide them. Or deep down we know what we've done or are doing and are ashamed of it. We might be able to function from day to day, but not to our fullest - unless we allow ourselves to become vulnerable and to be loved. This is where we need to let Jesus come to us. To surrender to Him and call to mind our sins, our struggles, our pains, and let Him into our hearts. His love is given not because we deserve it; rather Jesus loves us because we need His love. So as we prepare to enter into these solemn three days, allow yourself to be loved. Surrender to the amazing grace of Jesus. Call to mind your sins and know no sin is too great for God's mercy. Look at where you are at and bring those sins out in your private prayer, in confession, and in your hearts as you come to receive Holy Communion knowing that you are loved unconditionally, and need not

hide these things in the shadows. Surrender to the passion and death of Jesus and allow Jesus to wash your feet.

But, as you do that, do what Howard did too. Take the steps towards healing. Cooperate with grace by continuing the good things you've done in Lent and trying to become a better person. Learn from the past and strive to become a better person by coming to Communion often, by confessing and bringing things to God if the same sins happen again, and realizing that while we fall again and again on the road to heaven, we need to keep picking ourselves back up reaching out to Jesus, and learning how to grow stronger with His grace and move forward. Ask Jesus to fill your hearts so you can follow him more nearly.

And, lastly, perhaps the hardest part. Taking a page from Elizabeth and serving others. Some people as I said are really hard to love. But Jesus washes the feet of the apostles including Judas who will betray Him. He gives us the mandatum, the mandate, to love each other, in the powerful example of the foot washing. We are to love each other without reserve. It is given freely; no one is keeping score. Real love leads us to love even the least desirable part of the other. Hopefully we can go forth from this Mass

and strive to do that better. Never forget, all those simple actions we do: making a meal for our family; sitting up late with the kids to help with homework; saying bedtime prayers with the little ones; or sometimes saying “no” as an act of love, or doing something nice for a neighbor, these things matter a great deal.

But how about the more challenging acts of love? Who are the Howards in your life? Maybe it’s someone in politics or someone you don’t know all that well; or perhaps someone who wronged you or maybe even someone who has died. A good starting point is to pray for that person and to ask for God’s help to try to forgive and surrender the hate and anger and leave it at the foot of the cross. From there, perhaps you can take a page from Elizabeth. Maybe the person has been hostile towards you or wants nothing to do with you but it’s really just the person lashing out because other things are going on; they are too ashamed like Howard was to admit what’s going on, so they are hiding; hiding from the fact that they were hurt by someone in their own life; hiding from the fact that they have an addiction, or had a financial setback, or a work situation, or feel like they live in the shadow of a sibling, or are responsible for a marriage falling apart because of their own actions or whatever it might be, or are too proud

to say “I’m sorry.” Praying for these people in our lives, and praying for strength, and reaching out to them saying “can I pray with you” or “can I come over” or writing them a letter, offering them an olive branch, it’s amazing what can happen when we don’t give up on people.

Sin and life situations make all of us like Howard a times; grace though truly sets us free as it did for Howard who left that nursing home. As we approach the table of the Lord, may we envision those who need our help, those we are called to serve. The transformed bread and wine are the nourishment we need to be servants. As we eat and drink, let us allow this feast to open our eyes and hearts to the love God gives us, allowing ourselves to served and liberated, and using what we are given to serve one another.