

MAUNDY THURSDAY, APRIL 1, 2021

Maundy Thursday takes its name from the Latin word for mandate, which is the commandment that Jesus gives the disciples: "A new commandment that you love one another as I have loved you." So, he takes that meal and foot washing to show them what that looks like, to impress upon them servant leadership and laying down one's life for another. I like to tell you this story from Chicken Soup for the Soul that I believe perfectly illustrates what Jesus was saying.

A man named Michael got up every morning at 4 A.M., in good and bad weather, workday or holiday, and walked into his kitchen to make sandwiches. His sandwiches were famous to those who desperately needed them to stave off hunger for the day. By 5:50 A.M., he would be making the rounds of the makeshift homeless shelters on Centre and Lafayette Streets, near New York's City Hall. In a short time, he'd give out 200 sandwiches to as many homeless people as he could, before beginning his work day in the New York City courthouse.

It had started 20 years ago with a cup of coffee and a roll for a homeless man named John. Day after day, Michael brought John sandwiches, tea, clothes, and when it was really cold, a resting place in his car while he worked. In the beginning, Michael just wanted to do a good deed. But one day a voice in his head compelled him to do more. On that cold, winter morning, he asked John if he would like to get cleaned up. It was an empty offer, because Michael was sure John would refuse. Unexpectedly, John said, "Are you gonna wash me?"

Michael heard an inner voice say, "Put your money where your mouth is." He looked at this poor man, covered in ragged and smelly clothes, unkempt, hairy and wild-looking and Michael was afraid. But he also knew that he was looking at a big test of his commitment. So he helped John upstairs to the locker room of the courthouse to begin the work.

John's body was a mass of cuts and sores, the result of years of pain and neglect. His right hand had been amputated, and Michael pushed through his own fears and revulsion. He helped John wash, cut his hair, shaved him and shared breakfast with him. "It was at that moment," Michael remembers, "that I knew I had a calling, and I believed that I had it within me to do anything. There are days when it's snowing, and I have a hard time leaving my warm bed and the comfort of my family to go downtown with sandwiches. But then that voice in me starts chattering, and I get to it."

And get to it he does. Michael has made 200 sandwiches every day for the past 20 years. "When I give out sandwiches," Michael explains, "I don't simply lay them on a table for folks to pick up. I look everyone in the eye, shake their hands, and I offer them my wishes for a good and hopeful day. Each person is important to me. I don't see them as 'the homeless', but as people who need food, an encouraging smile and some positive human contact.

Once a man had disappeared from the ranks of the sandwich takers, and Michael thought about him from time to time. He hoped the man had moved on to more comfortable conditions. One day, the man showed up, transformed, greeting Michael clean, warmly clothed, shaven and carrying sandwiches of his own to hand out. Michael's daily dose of fresh food, warm handshakes, eye contact and well wishes had given this man the hope and encouragement he so desperately needed. Being seen every day as

a person, not as a category, had turned this man's life around. The moment needed no dialogue. The two men worked silently, side by side, handing out their sandwiches. It was another day on the streets of New York, but a day with just a little more hope because he chose to see Jesus in every person he met.

And Jesus said, "By this, everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." Amen.