



# A sermon for DIACONAL SUNDAY

February 24, 2019



*"There's a candle in the window and the candle's always on."* These are words from the opening song *"Welcome to the Rock"* from the musical *"Come From Away."* The musical tells the true story of Gander Newfoundland on September 11, 2001. This little town of 10,000 people on the Eastern point of Canada welcomed 38 planes diverted after the terrorist attacks of 9/11. They took in almost 7000 people, the *"Come-From-Aways."* It is a celebration of the goodness in humanity, and the friendships and blessings blossoming from the ashes of a tragedy. Strangers serving foreigners, and serving with love.

The people of Gander, Newfoundland and Labrador, embodied the generosity and radical love Jesus talks about in our Gospel reading today. Blessings overflowed. One airline captain commented how when her passengers boarded her plane days later to continue their flight it was like watching people return from a spa weekend. They were relaxed and happy. New friendships had formed. All thanks to the hospitality and blessings showered on them by complete strangers. A sense of community was created. Many of those same passengers returned 10 years later to rekindle friendship created in the midst of crisis.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus invites us to create community by showing radical love, blessing, forgiveness, generosity and trust to strangers, enemies and friends alike. In short he is calling us to serve one another. What a perfect reading for this last Sunday in February. A Sunday set aside by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC) to celebrate the common call to *diakonia* that we all share. Simply put, *diakonia* is the call to service. It comes from the Greek language and it encompasses the call we all are given to love and serve one another in community.

Something radical happens when we open our hearts and minds to even the smallest act of service to one another. It creates a ripple effect that reaches out far beyond our wildest imaginations. The inspiration to serve may come from the most unlikely source and may emerge from the greatest of tragedies. The ripple effect from this kind of service may lead to a lifetime of ministry that no one but God can predict.

Take for example the story of seven-year-old Nicholas Green. This small child would become a source of life for seven people he never met, and would inspire an entire nation. He was born on New Years Eve in 1986. He was an imaginative, active child who loved reading and adventures. His favorite stories were from the adventures in Narnia, written by C. S. Lewis. He would even act some of the scenes out with his little sister, Eleanor. When he was seven the family took a holiday to Europe. The family pictures tell a story of happiness and love. One picture shows



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Nicholas laughing in front of the famous Matterhorn in the Swiss Alps. Four days after that picture was taken, as the family was driving back to their Italian hotel in their rental car, their car was passed by a group of robbers. Shots were fired and Nicholas was shot in the head. He was rushed to the hospital, where he would remain in a coma for two days. His parents had to face the harsh reality that their son was brain-dead. In the shock and trauma that followed, his parents asked that their son's vital organs be transplanted. At the time Italy had the lowest rate of organ donations in Europe. Nicholas' heart, liver, kidneys, pancreas, and corneas brought new life to seven Italian children. In the midst of the trauma and heartache of death and darkness, light could be found. Moved by the incredible gift of the grieving parents, other families responded. In what became known as the "Nicholas effect," organ donation rose dramatically in Italy. Ten years after Nicholas' life giving gift to 7 Italian children, Italy boasted the highest rate of organ donations in Europe.

In the midst of facing the darkness of death and grief, light and new life were found. This is what Paul so passionately preaches about in his letter to the Corinthians. Continuing to love in the midst of darkness can be shaped into beacons of hope and new life by God.

In a television interview on the first anniversary of Nicholas' death, an Italian reporter asked his parents why they made the decision to gift Italian children with their son's organs. Maggie, Nicholas's mother, simply responded "we did so out of love." The reporter seemed unsatisfied with the answer and pushed it further, "Italian criminals killed your child, yet you chose to use your son's life to give life to Italian children, why?" Maggie, with tears in her eyes, answered as best she could. Their decision was an easy one, despite the pain and trauma, we are all here to serve and help one another. This was how Nicholas could serve the people of Italy. This was how we could honor his life and his spirit.

Nicholas' story is tragic and shocking. It seems to be the last possible source for inspiration to serve our neighbours. In the midst of the darkness of her grief, Maggie decided to consider the needs of Italian children waiting for organ donation. What is inspiring is that she had compassion for others even as she was feeling her own raw pain. As a result of this experience, Maggie felt called to live a life promoting organ donation.

Life can be challenging. There are moments when we will experience the highest of highs and the lowest of lows. Living in community means that we are called to help each other navigate the highs and lows of life. Serving one another means offering light and hope in moments of darkness and despair. This may mean rising above sibling rivalry, as Joseph did in our Old



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Testament reading, to forgive his brothers and find a way to reconciliation. Or it may be through loving our enemies as Jesus calls us to do in our Gospel reading. Love and service go hand in hand. Simply put, we are all called to serve one another with love. Serving another is sometimes easy; and sometimes it is very hard. Jesus calls us to love and indeed serve our enemies. There are times in life where that call may seem to be an almost impossible task. But amazing things can happen from the smallest of acts of kindness. When it feels impossible to carry on, the tiniest of steps of service to one another can bring great comfort and hope.

Paul could have easily given up on serving the early church while he was in prison and chained to a Roman soldier, but he did not. Some of his most inspirational letters come from those dark years in prison. Life will be full of moments that will challenge us, and may drive us to give up on the people around us. It can be easy for us to be overwhelmed by the magnitude of Christ's mandate to love and serve our enemies, and turn the other cheek. Where do we even begin? We begin with the first step. We begin with the first tiniest of acts of service.

The local dentist in Gander, Newfoundland found himself overwhelmed as he listened to the radio reporting about plane after plane landing at the local airport. He realized he needed to do something. He closed his business for the day and went out and bought every toothbrush he could find to distribute to the makeshift shelters springing up around town for the stranded passengers. A simple little act, but it certainly made a big difference.

Where can we begin on this Diaconal Sunday to answer the call our Savior gives for us to serve one another? Perhaps you are facing tragedy in your own life, or stresses that are sapping all of your time and energy and you doubt your ability to serve. Christ's mandate to love and serve seems daunting and huge. But where God is concerned, even the smallest, little action can lead to big ripple effects and change. So challenge yourself to take even the smallest step into service. Perhaps offer a hug to someone you sense is lonely today. Or offer to shovel the walk of your next door neighbour. Or listen generously and quietly to one who needs to tell their story and name their grief.

We are a community in Christ. We are called to serve one another. So this Diaconal Sunday is a call to all of us. *Amen.*