Affirmation
By Townley Chisholm

If you walk on dusty roads all day in sandals, what are your feet going to be like at the end of the day? In the reading for today, Jesus kneels and washes the feet of each of his disciples. Do you know what the occasion is, what happens next? That’s right, the occasion is the Last Supper and what happens next is the crucifixion of Jesus. Jesus has been leading and teaching his disciples for three years and now, at the end of his time with them and before he gives his life for them, he kneels and washes their feet. This story (and the crucifixion that follows) is the most powerful example in the Christian tradition of leadership as an act of love, service, and sacrifice. Please take a moment to think about people you know in leadership positions who approach leadership this way, as an act of love. I can’t think of many examples on the national level, but here at camp I see lots of examples all around me both in campers and counsellors.

For a week this spring, I lived with a baby turkey. My son, Isaiah, raises all kinds of baby animals that have no other hope, so when his friends found this newly hatched turkey chick in the middle of the road with no adult anywhere in sight, they brought the chick to him. Isaiah already had a red squirrel the size of his thumb (it weighed 15 grams – as much as 3 nickels), and he had to feed Pickle, the squirrel, every three hours night and day, so he passed the chick along to me. She really was newly hatched, too, with her egg-tooth that she used to fight her way out of the egg still firmly attached to the end of her tiny bill. Isaiah bought her a 40-pound bag of food that she wouldn’t eat, and I tried feeding her earthworms, but she wouldn’t eat those either. I knew she could live for about a day on the yolk stored in her body, but I was getting worried about her because of course I didn’t know how long she had been out of the egg. So where would you go to find out how to teach a baby turkey how to eat? Absolutely, YouTube has all the answers. The YouTube guy said to teach her to peck with my finger like this, so I did, and she started eating small earthworms and pieces of larger earthworms. YouTube man also said to teach her to drink in a similar way, like this, and I tried, but she didn’t seem to get the hang of drinking. I kept dipping her beak in water, though, and she’d swallow after each dip. To keep her warm, I put her in the pocket of this sweatshirt; in a whole week she never pooped in there once, and she rode around in there for hours at a time while I was teaching classes at school, going to assembly, and supervising labs. She made these little peeping sounds all the time except when she was asleep, but none of the students seemed to notice. From time to time I think she got cold in the pocket because she would stand up straight and stretch her legs to get as close to me as possible... as if she were sheltering under the wings of her mother and trying to get closer to mom’s body heat.

When the weather was warm and I had free periods, I would take Laurel (the chick) for walks in the woods and scrape the leaves away from the dirt so that she could find bugs and worms to eat. She began following me almost immediately, the classic imprinting response from a baby precocial bird. As Jack would have found with his baby quail, they will follow anything that is large and dark and that doesn’t eat them. Laurel and I would walk along, and she’d venture off under the plants on either side of the path, peeping the whole way so that I could keep track of her because I certainly couldn’t see her. When she found a worm that was
too big or active to swallow (And, those worms wriggle like crazy when touched. I think they are trying to deter hungry birds.,) she’d pick it up and shake her head violently and quickly from side to side, flinging off ends of the worm in the process; this violent shaking worked both to subdue the worm and to break it into pieces that she could swallow. And when our woods time was over, I’d lead the way back down the path to the science building and she’d run along peeping behind me the whole way back. These peeps weren’t distress peeps; they seemed more like “Here I am. Here I am.” peeps.

At night the chick slept in a cardboard box in my room with a heat lamp on her and this stuffed elephant to act as a cozy buddy and help keep her warm. The lamp kept me awake a little with its red light, but things got bad the sixth night when she refused to go to sleep and kept making loud distress peeps. Eventually I held her in my hand in bed and tried to get some sleep, but I was so worried that I was going to crush her that I slept very little that night. She settled right down and went to sleep immediately. Of course, while she was imprinting on me, I was imprinting on her. I loved watching her move around exploring the woods, I loved watching her flight feathers grow (Turkey chicks can fly at two weeks, so those feathers grow really fast.), and I loved listening to all of her communication with me. On the evening of the seventh day, she was in this pocket in the kitchen when my son took a step toward me that may have frightened her. Anyway, she leapt out and hit the floor pretty hard. I picked her up, and she seemed okay, but she wouldn’t eat any more and just made these very soft pipping sounds. She was still alive at 1:00 a.m. and at 3:00 a.m. when I checked on her, but at 6 a.m. she was dead. So, I buried her in the woods where she loved to run around.

Of course she died. Young orphan animals almost always do. Once she got separated from her mother, she didn’t have a chance. But she didn’t know that, and the life force was strong in her. Even if she had lived long enough to grow out her flight feathers, how was I going to introduce her to the family of the turkeys that live on our little farm? And if I raised her to adulthood and tried to turn her loose, she might well have walked up to strangers who would think they were being attacked… or who were turkey hunters. In one very real sense, I was stupid to try to help her since the odds of a successful outcome for her were so very, very long. But she was a tiny, day-old chick when she came to me, and I was the only chance she had. I just couldn’t turn away and let her die. I loved getting to know her, and I would try to foster her again – in a heartbeat – even knowing how things were going to end. By living with her and caring for her, I learned a lot about the instincts with which baby turkeys leave the egg, about how turkey chicks develop physically and mentally, and about how they form emotional bonds with other beings, usually turkeys. When she died I missed all those things, but what I missed most was her presence and the long, quiet moments of delight that we shared walking in the woods together. She reminded me to look for those moments of beauty, those moments of miracle, those moments of deep, shared happiness.

Please look at your chapel partner; take a good long look. Now look at the boy or man on your other side, and now the one sitting in front of you, and now the one sitting behind you. Each one of these people is like a turkey chick. We all need food, warmth (plenty of that today), shelter, and company to survive. I hope that you are on good terms with everyone in this community, that there is no one that you would – if you had the power – deprive of food and let starve to death. We nourish each other in other ways that are just as important as food, and you can see that nourishing clearly here at camp. Mr. Vinnie has emphasized kindness all
summer long, and I think we have done a pretty good job, though sadly not a perfect one, of creating a kind community where we all feel safe being ourselves. There is a difference, however, between being kind to someone in an I’m-nice-to-everyone kind of way and showing that person that you actively like, appreciate, enjoy, and celebrate him or her, just for being who he or she is, just for that nugget of personhood that sits at the core of each of us.

Please think with me about what our camp community could be like if we encouraged and celebrated everyone and not just the special, few people that we call close friends. In such a community, each of us would know that all the people around us care for us, appreciate our differences, and hope for the best for us. We could let down the defenses that we use to keep people at a distance. We could know other people and be known by them. To get closer to such a community, we’re going to need to practice some difficult skills, the skills of loving widely and of opening up. To love widely, we must learn to look at each person around us as a miracle who has entered our lives for a little while and who has infinite worth and infinite beauty. This skill is not an easy one to learn, and I am far from mastering it, but when I look around me at camp, I see people who deeply, genuinely appreciate and affirm every person they meet through the day. Those people are an inspiration and an example for all of us because they hope for and expect the best from each of us and constantly encourage us to be our best. Opening up means letting the people around us get to know us and is risky because they may reject or make fun of us. But opening up is also the only way that other people can get to know us. I encourage you to take that risk.

Last night’s talent show and skits were terrific examples of what I’m talking about. We had all kinds of campers and counsellors up there on the stage sharing parts of themselves with us, and the community took deep delight in supporting and applauding each person and his act. The acts and the camp response were beautiful and brought us together in a powerful way that we could all feel and that lingers still like the gift it was, like the small miracle it was.

When you look at the camp as a group of talented, interesting, unique individuals, each with tremendous and surprising talents and potentials, then you are happy to serve them in all kinds of ways. Picking up trash, cleaning Mem Hall trouble spots, and dealing with whatever problems arise are just the things we do for the people who we genuinely care about as is listening to whatever they want to tell us. And, as more and more people adopt this approach to camp and to each other, the power of the community – of our shared affection and support for each other – grows and grows and grows.

We have three weeks left of a wonderful season. Three weeks from today this chapel will be filled with crying people hugging each other goodbye. Let’s make the absolute most of this time together by affirming and encouraging all the people around us all of the time. We have no time for being mean to each other. When you see or hear meanness, please step up and stop it. When you feel irritation rising in you because of something another person is doing, stop and think about how lucky we are to get to spend this time, this precious shrinking time, with each other in this beautiful place.

Look at your hands. No, seriously, look at your hands. They can do anything and they have learned new skills this summer. Good! There are other, more important, life-changing skills to learn here at camp: the skills of listening well, of trying hard to understand another person, and of supporting and affirming every single person we are lucky enough to share time with in our days here. As one of our Tree Talks reminded us, we have a lot of practice hoping
for the best for ourselves and forgiving ourselves, learning to do so for others shouldn’t be too hard. Pasquaney is the best community I have ever known for working on these skills. See what you can do with them. Build the habits of being kind, of looking for good in everyone, and of being your true self – the one you deeply want to become.