

Introduction to the Theme

Love to Serve

It is not how much you do; it is how much love you put in the doing that matters.

~*Mother Teresa of Calcutta*

When asked, “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” (Matthew 22:36), Jesus declined to accept the limitation implied in the question. He responded by quoting not one but two commandments: “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And, a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matthew 22:37-40).

Following Jesus’ example, the Christian faith holds love of God and love of neighbor in the closest of unions. To head off any hairsplitting about who qualifies as a “neighbor,” the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37) defines that term in a way that was calculated to scandalize those who heard the story. In that parable, Jesus extends love’s boundaries to include even, and especially, those whose religion, culture, ethnicity, and social status differ significantly from one’s own.

Truly God and truly human, Jesus is at once both the incarnation or embodiment of God’s love for humankind and for the whole of creation, as well as an example of what it means to love God with all one’s being and to love one’s neighbor as oneself. Such love involves the totality of one’s life: heart, soul, mind, and strength. While love certainly includes such emotions as compassion and empathy, the love of which Jesus speaks is not primarily a feeling or disposition; it is an *action*. Jesus described his mission in words of action: “. . . the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve . . .” (Matthew 20:28).

Service to God and neighbor can, therefore, be understood as *love in action*.

What shape does this service take? Glad you asked! There are several ways to answer that question, and a good first step for us is to take a look at how the Bible talks about service.

Servants, Servanthood, and Service in the Bible

So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. ~ *Jesus, John 13:14–15*

In the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible, *‘ebed* is the word most often translated as servant. *‘Ebed* can refer to a slave, to the subjects of a king or queen, to state officials, or to the worshippers of a god. The prophets Isaiah (41:8), Jeremiah (30:10), and Ezekiel (28:25) all refer to Israel as the servant of God. There are also four passages in Isaiah, commonly called the Servant Songs, that describe one who suffers to fulfill his divine mission. Scholars’ opinions regarding the identity of the suffering servant range widely, but whoever Isaiah may have had in mind, Christians have always seen in these songs a poetic description of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

In the New Testament or Greek Bible, at least seven different words are translated as servant. Two of the three most commonly used are *doulos* (slave) and *pais* (child—much as a waiter can, without insult, be called *muchacho* in Spanish or *garçon* in French). Jesus is called the *pais* or servant of God in Matthew 12, and in an important hymn quoted in Philippians 2:7, Paul says that Jesus took the form of a *doulos*. Christians are called *douloi* or slaves of Christ, and, using that same word, Paul exhorts the faithful, “through

love [to] become slaves to one another” (Galatians 5:13).

The third word most frequently translated as servant is *diakonos*, from the word for service, *diakonia*. Jesus told his disciples, “. . . whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant (*diakonos*), and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave (*doulos*) of all” (Mark 10:43-44). Of his own ministry, Jesus said, “But I am among you as one who serves (*diakonon*)” (Luke 22:27). The question of whether *diakonos* refers to a particular office—the office of deacon—in the New Testament church (see especially 1 Timothy 3) is hotly debated and, fortunately, is largely irrelevant to our purposes. The important things for us to note are the following:

- *Diakonia* or diaconal service can take a variety of forms. It includes the proclamation of the gospel in word and action (Acts 6 and 7). It refers to the service of the apostles in general (1 Corinthians 3:5). It includes fundraising for the poor (2 Corinthians 8:4). It includes the humblest and most menial forms of service, as Jesus demonstrated in washing the disciples’ feet (John 13).
- *Diakonia* expresses love, solidarity, and even intimacy between the servant and those who are served. The Good Samaritan’s gentle, hands-on care of the man who was beaten (Luke 10:29-37), Jesus’ washing of the disciples’ feet (John 13:3-20), and Dorcas’ making of tunics for the widowed women of her village (Acts 9:36-43) each demonstrate a personal, physical connection between the server and the served.
- *Diakonia* is countercultural. North American culture esteems the rugged individualist who doggedly pursues personal gain and the accumulation of material wealth. *Diakonia* draws people into community and esteems sharing, self-giving, and self-sacrifice. Author Flannery O’Connor expressed the counter-cultural nature of Christian servanthood well when she said, “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you odd.”
- *Diakonia* is a manifestation of the topsy-turvy logic of the gospel. The gospel proclaims the reality of a realm in which the last are first and the first are last, a realm in which those who would be great are called, gifted, and empowered to be servants.
- Because it is not only humankind that belongs to this realm, but the whole of creation (Romans 8:21, Mark 16:15), *diakonia* includes loving service to God’s created world and responsible stewardship of the environment.

Do I Have To?

A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none; a Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.~ *Martin Luther*

Jesus is clear that his followers serve not in order to feel good about themselves, enhance their reputation, improve their self-esteem, pad their résumés, merit God’s favor, or be thought well of by other people, but simply because it is their duty to serve. “Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded?” he asked his disciples. “So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, ‘We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!’” (Luke 17:9-10). Jesus is not encouraging self-abasement, self-loathing, or undignified groveling when he says these things. Christ-like service has nothing in common with being a doormat, being a person other people take advantage of and walk all over. Rather, Jesus is making the point that God owes us no debt of gratitude for our acts of *diakonia*. God owes us no thanks (*charis*); instead, we are saved by God’s grace (*charis*) (Ephesians 2:8). Therefore, “thanks (*charis*) be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Romans 7:25).

Love is a giveaway and diakonia (loving service) and is a Spirit-generated and Spirit-empowered response to that love. Those involved in diakonia often report that their service to others generates a wealth of good feelings. That's wonderful, and we would be foolish to ignore or abhor this beneficial byproduct of service to God and others. But if the church ever begins to "market" diakonia as a means to, for example, enhanced self-esteem, we will be guilty of a gross corruption of the gospel. Instead of entering into the shared mystery of genuine community with those served, we will have objectified them, treating God's children as a means to our own self-centered ends. We serve our neighbors (a) in grateful response to God's grace and love and (b) because they are in need, not because we expect to get anything—even good feelings—out of it. About other dangers of diakonia's potential "dark side," more will be said below.

What Time Are Your Services?

It's no accident that Christians often refer to their gatherings around God's word and sacraments as worship *services*. The Greek word *leitourgia*, the root of the English word liturgy, means service. Used principally in secular settings in the Greek world, this term does not refer exclusively or even primarily to worship. It also includes service in public and daily life. This close association suggests that we serve God both in "services" of prayer, praise, and thanksgiving *and* in loving service rendered to our neighbor. This connection becomes a vitally important concept as we help campers to associate love of God with love of neighbor and vice versa. As we sing in one familiar hymn,

The supper is ended.

Oh, now be extended

The fruits of this service

In all who believe.¹

Or more simply, as we say at the *end* of many worship services: "Go in peace. Serve the Lord. Thanks be to God."

Learning to Serve . . . and Serving to Learn

Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I may remember. Involve me and I will learn. ~
Benjamin Franklin

Service-learning has become a popular concept in educational and other institutions in recent years. As the name suggests, it combines volunteer or community service with traditional learning activities. Service-learning, however, is not the same as volunteerism; nor is it a service component or a module tacked on to an existing course or curriculum. It is a "pedagogy of engagement," a kind of teaching and learning that enables those involved to participate actively in a cycle of action and reflection. Theoretical (in our case, biblical, theological, and catechetical) knowledge is translated into practice in concrete ways that address real needs. Individual and group reflection refines and enriches the theory, putting human flesh on dry theoretical bones. The insights gained from reflection then enhance the practice, and so the cycle continues.

While not grounded in or arising from a religious tradition, service-learning possesses significant potential to impact campers in the vital work of making meaning, that is, making sense of the world, themselves, their relationships, and God. Jesus' followers often have an intuitive, instinctual awareness that faith in the incarnate Son of God expresses itself, in part, in care for the physical and emotional needs of those who lack

such things as food, shelter, clothing, and companionship. Service-learning in an explicitly Christian context seeks to draw that awareness to the surface and relate it to the Christian faith through active learning and reflection. Many Christian communities seek actively to inculcate a sense of service to people in need as an essential part of Christian discipleship and our baptismal vocation. Jesus' personal identification with the hungry, sick, imprisoned, and ill-clad in Matthew 25 profoundly impacts the self-understanding of both the Christian community and its baptized members. Loving and serving God and neighbor in such concrete ways is, in part, what the church means by the term *praxis*: the worship and theology of the church (orthodoxy) manifests itself not merely in right thinking, but in right acting (*orthopraxy*).

Reflection Makes the Connection

The unexamined life is not worth living.~ *Socrates*

Proponents and practitioners sometimes refer to reflection as the hyphen in service-learning. Reflection is the mental, emotional, and spiritual act that connects doing with being. In faith-based programs, it connects orthodoxy and orthopraxy. It encourages participants to ponder such questions as, "What did I see? What did I feel? Who am I in this situation? How does my experience correspond to, challenge, alter, deepen, or correct my existing views? How does my faith affect my perceptions and influence my actions? Is my faith adequate to deal with what I saw and felt and experienced? What does my faith community tell me, and how is that the same as or different from what my culture tells me? What is God calling me to do now?" Reflection before, during, and after a service activity is indispensable if we want campers to make the vital connection between faith and service.

Reflection activities are not all of one sort. Just as there are different learning styles, there are different varieties of reflection. Those most commonly used are journaling, group discussion, writing integrative papers, and preparing and making a presentation to a class or group. Reflection activities can also include meditating on a passage of scripture and relating it to the service experience, writing poetry or prayers, scrapbooking, blogging, even dancing and drumming.² Different participants will benefit differently from any given type; service-learning practitioners do well, therefore, to employ a variety of reflection activities. A camper whose dominant learning style is kinesthetic is likely to reflect best by doing something active such as creating an artifact or performing. A visual learner may benefit most from composing an illustrated presentation. An auditory learner will reflect well through discussion and conversation.

Pitfalls and Principles

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. ~ *St. Paul, Romans 7:21*

Like any other ministry of the church, service-learning can be done well or it can be done poorly. Here are a few potholes and pitfalls common to many servant events, and the principles that can help us avoid falling into them:

- *Commodifying those whom we serve.* We alluded to this danger earlier: objectifying those served, treating them as a means to our own ends. One of the goals of loving service is entering into community and solidarity with those whom we serve. Typically, we enter into their world, and we need to be open to receiving the gifts of

their hospitality, hearing their stories, and sharing—for however brief a period of time—their lived realities.

- *Ogling*. We want to *serve*, not merely *observe*. Unless we're doing projects to benefit God's four-legged creatures, those we serve are not creatures in a zoo. We seek not to study the problem, but rather to be part of the solution.
- *Giving handouts*. A truck pulls into a poor community, the back doors fly open, and well-intentioned people begin to distribute whatever it is they've brought: vitamins, food, toiletries, sandals, educational supplies, clothing, and the like. That may be the best model for first responders to a natural disaster who just need to get the material distributed rapidly. It is seldom if ever an acceptable model for most other servant events. For one thing, it is undignified. For another, it casts the non-poor in the role of beneficent givers and the recipients in the role of needy targets of well-intentioned charity. A better model is to arrange to give the donated materials to a local congregation or social-service agency, and ask that they distribute it. First, they may know the people of the community and their degree of need. Second, they may be aware of and familiar with those unscrupulous individuals who would attempt to exploit the system. Third, by giving them the material, servant groups feed two birds with one crumb: they get the donated materials to the intended recipients, and they enhance the outreach ministry and credibility of the local congregation or agency.
- *Keeping our distance*. To the degree possible, we should always seek to work with and alongside and never merely for those whom we intend to help.
- *Disempowering*. Identifying the needs to be addressed by a service project should be done jointly with those in whose communities we serve. We bring resources they may lack. They have insights to which we are not privy. God brings us together so that together we might discern and do God's will.

Conclusion

Jesus said, "But I am among you as one who serves" (Luke 22:27). As his disciples, we follow our Savior's lead. As we engage in loving service to our neighbor, Bible and theology come alive in new ways. We begin to think of service as embodied and enacted theology. Christ-like service generates questions and enhances curiosity. Whether as a special event or as part of our daily life, serving provides teachable and learnable moments. When learning and serving are done within an explicitly Christian context, where mutual love and openness to the Spirit's movement prevail, then the words of 1 John 3:18 take on new dimensions of meaning: "Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action."

1. Omer Westendorf, "Sent Forth by God's Blessing," *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2006), 547.
2. Janet Eyller and Dwight Giles, *A Practitioner's Guide to Reflection in Service-Learning: Student Voices and Reflections* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1996).

Love to Serve Outdoor Ministries, © 2008 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. May be reproduced for local use.