Singing a Subversive Song of Hope

Lydia Neufeld Harder

Introduction

The overall title for these conference presentations intrigued me: *Embracing Hope. Envisioning an Inclusive Theology of Service*. I immediately noted the way it "embraces" both feminist theology and Mennonite tradition. After all, inclusivity has become a code word for feminist theological convictions, an ethos of that community of dialogue. At the same time, no Mennonite will likely question my statement that "service" is still a politically correct term in Mennonite circles. But the title also hints that there is a certain discomfort when inclusivity and service are put into the same sentence. Inclusive service is not yet a reality in either feminist or Mennonite circles. Thus these conversations among women who feel caught between opposite convictions are intended to create a new vision and theology of service. Perhaps this dialogue may yet lead to a song of hope and joy.

Two overarching methodological moves frame this paper. Part I is a critical analysis of the experience of service. New aspects of service are visible if those who serve step back for a moment from the immediacy of their experience in order to ask questions about what is really happening in those interactions. My observations come primarily from my own experience from within the Mennonite church. Thus when I use the term "we" I am referring to Mennonite women. However, all women and men are invited to reflect on their experience of service.

This analysis can open us to a second methodological move, a re-examination of the theology that supports our notions of service. Mennonite theology has primarily been based on biblical texts heard over and over again in the preaching and teaching within our churches. Many Mennonite women,

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Lydia Neufeld Harder is adjunct faculty at Conrad Grebel University College and teaches at the Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre.

however, feel alienated from this theology. For example, they struggle with theological notions such as understanding service as a "giving away of one's self," holding up martyrdom as the ideal of service, and evaluating any admission of one's own needs as selfish. The discussion at this "Women Doing Theology" conference confirmed this alienation. In Part II of this paper, we will reread key biblical texts with eyes more aware of the complexities of the notion of service in order to begin the process of rethinking our theology.

The title of my presentation, "Singing a Subversive Song of Hope," uses the imagery of music to help us envision service in a different key. Music includes both consonant and dissonant chords. When we place our experience and the biblical text side by side, we can hear the dissonant chords most clearly. Sometimes we wonder if the song that is produced can ever become harmonious again. Yet I believe it is in paying attention to the tension and discord that we can again hear the voice of God. The discernment of this voice of God must come from an inclusive community that is ready to begin by listening. At first we may hear only songs of domination and servitude. But perhaps, as we listen closely, we will find the familiar pattern of notes and rhythms disrupted. The pattern that has been practiced endlessly will slowly give way to a new rhythm, a different harmonization, or even a new melody line. Though the first notes of our new composition may be sung with hesitation, I hope we will find the courage to sing and dance together, each of us contributing to the whole. The song will be one of hospitality and of freedom, of receiving and giving, of justice and communion because it will be based on the kind of love that God has shown us.

I. An Analysis of the Experience of Service

The term "service" is overused in our society. When I read the daily newspaper, a textbook, or the church bulletin – all of them use "service" as a kind of short-hand for actions and practices assumed to be related to each other by some common core. My dictionary suggests twenty basic meanings, ranging from "work done for a master or superior" to a "branch of the United States Armed Forces." In its ideal meaning, service is something a person does for someone else, thus at least temporarily preferring the other's good to one's own. Sandra Schneiders suggests that service is essentially an act of self-gift,

of love in its purest form, since the ultimate preferring of another's good would be giving one's life for another.[1]

Rarely, however, do we experience service as the pure self-gift of another. Other models of service have been created that allow many variations on this theme, yet continue to convey the image of self-giving and caring for the other. Service has become a slippery term, used glibly to sanctify various actions, practices, and institutions. Thus we are confused, often not sure where love for the other and love for ourselves overlap. In addition, the ambiguity of the term allows meanings from one realm of life to contaminate or erode ideal meanings in another realm. For example, how exactly is serving as CEO in a corporation related to serving as a volunteer in a nursing home?

I want to illuminate the complexity of our uses of the term "service" by examining three models present in our society and churches from a simple phenomenological point of view.[2] Underlying all of these is service *as a relationship* between persons or institutions – a relationship that includes elements of power and authority.[3] I will pay particular attention to the boundaries assumed in each model that separate people from each other. This will help us decide whether and how each model is inclusive or exclusive. Of course, "inclusivity" and "exclusivity" have their own problems of definition. Inclusivity can range from mere tolerance to indifference to a hearty welcome of the other. But inclusion and service overlap in their common focus on relationships and their common entanglement with power.

(1) Service arising from a condition of inequality (servitude from "beneath")

In this model the servant must perform a "service" for the other because of some basic right or power which the latter is understood to possess. For example, a child in relation to parents, a slave in relation to a master, a laborer in relation to the boss. In every case the service arises because of a basic condition of inequality, and the service rendered tends to re-inforce this inequality in status. A child washes the dishes because her mother demands it. A woman serves coffee during breakfast because her husband claims such service is his right, a mother on social assistance works as a volunteer because the government forces her to do so in order to receive a basic income. All of these arise out of a structure of assumed rights and duties.

Though the demands may be benevolently intended, the inclination is for exploitation to take over. This is because the one higher in the hierarchy has the freedom to choose what the service will be and how it will be done. In addition, coercion and violence may be used to enforce this service from the one deemed subordinate. Whether overtly or subtly, pressure is put on the one beneath in the social hierarchy to conform to the will of the one above.

In this model the boundaries between people may be part of external institutional structures. More often, however, they are part of an inner class structure we have incorporated into our subconscious mind. Usually external and internal structures re-inforce each other and both persons accept the invisible boundaries that define this class system. A woman assumes her husband has the right to be served his coffee first, the man assumes it is her duty to serve him. Persons of European ancestry assume they have the right to the best hotels, persons of African ancestry assume they will serve in these same hotels. Laws of apartheid or patriarchy are not needed when such class structures are internalized.

In this model exclusion and inclusion are determined by how well people stay within the expected roles, how well they give up making their own choices. All can be included – if they respect the role that is given them. If the poor serve the rich, all can live together in harmony. If the uneducated comply with the will of the educated, there will be no hassle.

Sometimes there is an attempt at making these structures seem more equal by paying the one who serves or by naming the service something else. However, then the inequality is only more subtle and possibly more cruel. I may leave a tip at the restaurant, but I have clearly conceded to an invisible class system in the high-handed way I have addressed the waiter. The boss may name his secretary his "administrative assistant," but this does not change the possibility that she will be fired if she questions any of his demands. In addition, the remuneration given for her work only underlines the low value placed on her service.

In North America, it is an assumption of equality that makes this kind of service particularly open to exploitation. In our society, equality really means that everyone is equally welcome to compete for the top positions.[4] The competition is however already rigged to exclude those regarded as lower on the social scale. Someone who is disabled is welcome to apply for the higher

position, but the demands of the job must be fulfilled in the same way as before. An aboriginal person can apply for any job, but loss of dignity stolen through centuries of abuse, lack of a formal education, and subtle prejudices keep most indigenous people in lower paying jobs. Since the ones on top have the power to determine the norm, exclusion happens.

This model of service breeds competition and power struggles as well as domination and oppression. Those on a lower social scale do all they can to please those higher up, often compromising their own ethical standards so that they can climb up one rung. In this model we compete for status and prestige, not always realizing that even when we succeed, we have only succeeded in becoming an oppressor as well. Most of us will recognize our involvement in this model of service. The crucial question, however, is whether and how this model can be transformed into service that is truly a freely chosen gift of the self to the other.

(2) Service arising because of the need of the other (service from "above")

In this second model, service denotes "what the server does freely for the served because of some need perceived in the latter which the former has the power to meet."[5] This is the service a professional renders to a client, a parent to a child, the rich to the poor, the healthy to the sick. Often the appeals for charity that we hear from the church are built on this assumption. The need is so great! You have the ability to meet this need. Be compassionate! Come and serve!

Doesn't this model realize the ideal of service – the unforced seeking of the other's good? And isn't it built on a notion of equalizing assets? Giving to those who do not have by those who have? At its best, this model does suggest a sharing of resources that can lead to deeper relationships of equality. The choice to serve can be free, because the power to choose is given to the one doing the serving. However, it is within this inequality that the subtle temptation of this model lies. What seems like unselfish service contains the seeds of corruption, because the one who serves can easily seek her own good by "detouring" through service to the other. As a parent, I use my child to satisfy my own intimacy needs, as a pastor I view congregational members as needy sheep because this feeds my ego. We even give away our clothes to the "needy" so that our consciences won't bother us when we get new and better

clothes for ourselves. No wonder this kind of service is sometimes rejected or at least resisted.

Domination happens in this model when people are stereotyped or placed in the static roles of either "giver" or "needy." Those being served begin to see themselves as dependent, as helpless victims, not recognizing what resources they do have. Those serving view themselves as magnanimous givers, not admitting their own needs. Being rich or poor, educated or uneducated begins to indicate the kind of value accorded one's personhood, one's status on a social scale, rather than simply the kind of resources one has to share. These temptations are particularly dangerous in cases of chronic need. When dignity is taken away, power-plays based on stereotypes begin to happen. Domination, by the supposedly stronger person, partners with manipulation, by the supposedly weaker person, to destroy any kind of healthy relationship that could develop.

The term "servant leadership" that has recently become popular in management and organizational theory recognizes that most people in this model serve via institutions that facilitate or restrain their service.[6] We serve as elders or pastors in a church, as teachers in a school, or as nurses in a hospital. Our service is dictated by the institution rather than only by the particular needs of someone else. However, here too the institution tends to enlarge the power of the one serving rather than that of the one being served. "Servant leadership," with its focus on the one assumed to have the strength and power to facilitate change, can thus easily mask oppressive strategies. This is possibly why boundaries are much talked about in this model. The misuse of power has created the need for strong guidelines for professional conduct. It is now understood that the lack of choice given to those being served provides opportunities for abuse, including sexual or physical abuse.

Learning self-care is also a popular notion among professional caregivers. Learning to express one's own needs and finding ways to care for oneself is crucial when one's vocation consists primarily of giving to others. Women, who have been socialized to be givers and have also internalized low self-esteem, are particularly prone to put the need of others before their own.[7] However, the notion of self-care can also hide an unwillingness to see the "client" as more than a receiver of service. It can cover up the power of the professional who refuses to draw on the gifts of the larger community, preferring

instead to be the hero in the good Samaritan story. Thus, self-care can move into two directions: it can open us to receive as well as give; or it can create barriers to more mutual relationships in our service.

Inclusion in this model is determined by the people serving, since they have the power to determine both what is named as legitimate need and how that need should be met. Thus the church can decide who to serve in the broader community and what kind of service will be provided, while recipients of the service must quietly (and thankfully) accept what is offered. Again, a kind of artificial equality can be created by paying the server for the service, as in that provided by a professional such as a doctor, nurse, or lawyer. However, the basis of this model is still inequality, with the professional in charge of the interaction.

Exclusion happens in this second model when patterns of relationship develop in which some are exclusively named as givers or as self-sufficient while others are named as receivers or needy. This is readily illustrated by our response as a church to people with a different sexual orientation. To a specific need for acceptance and dialogue as expressed by homosexual persons, the church has responded by stereotyping all those who are homosexual as needy of conversion and salvation, implying that the rest of the church is healthy. This allows the church to exclude gays and lesbians from service through the church without looking at the gifts and commitments of individuals. Consider other general terms, such as "handicapped" or even "senior citizen," that are used to characterize people so that their individuality is lost and thus their individual choices are precluded. The temptation to stop the movement toward equality in the guise of service is real, because being on top has its benefits.

This model of service is probably the most prevalent in both the contemporary church and the larger society. Can it be transformed, so that service can truly be received as an expression of love and caring rather than experienced as dominating power?

(3) A model of solidarity and friendship (service based on equality)

Sandra Schneiders suggests that friendship is the one relationship based on equality. If friends do not begin as equals, they quickly abolish whatever inequality they discover or they make their differences serve mutual goals within the structure of the relationship. In interactions between them, the good

of the other is truly the good of oneself. But this self-fulfilment is not the result of a singular pursuit of one's own goals; rather, by receiving love as well as giving it, the happiness of both is assured. Service in this model is freely chosen both by the giver and the receiver. Therefore, it is liberating and freeing. At its best, service between friends affirms equality and promotes mutual dignity, is not demanded and creates no debts, expects no return but freely evokes reciprocity. Perhaps that is why true friendship is so rare and so precious.

Can this third model be extended to persons with whom we cannot naturally share the intimacy we experience within a freely chosen friendship? Can it be extended to institutional relationships? The term "solidarity" is sometimes used to express the kind of relationship we have with another based on the equality and dignity of each person. We stand with another, not above or beneath. Solidarity characterizes the relationship that puts all the gifts of individual persons at the service of the community or institution for the good of each as it is needed. Solidarity describes an interdependence of everyone, where the dignity of each is enhanced, and where coercion and violence are not needed to call anyone to serve.

Service within a relationship of equality cannot easily be institutionalized. Instead, barriers and boundaries are overcome when deliberate moves are made toward equality in status. Many of us have seen how a hierarchical relationship between a so-called boss and his administrative assistant begins to shift when both are involved in setting goals and making decisions that affect both. Even while responsibility is divided so that a diversity of gifts is recognized, the solidarity created can overcome status differences. Even service which might be considered servile and menial can be transformed into a loving action when friendship is at its basis. The seemingly one-sided service given by a loving daughter to her aging mother attests to this fact.

This model is not something that is achieved once and for all; rather, it must become a dynamic force that works itself out in practice. We can recognize solidarity when competition is lessened, co-operation increases, and stereotypes disappear. We see it blossom when decision-making is extended to everyone concerned with an issue. In communities where solidarity reigns, service is dynamic, continually creating new opportunities as gifts are discovered, developed, and used for the good of all.

What about exclusion and inclusion? Because service in the third model is freely given and freely received, it cannot be coerced or forced. Both partners in the relationship must be involved in establishing the mutuality on which solidarity and friendship depend. Thus service here invites and welcomes others. However, the rate of refusal is high, because it is costly to give up seeing oneself in terms of rights, duties, power, or needs. Thus those who do not wish to risk refusal of their gifts, or to accept the dependency inherent in receiving, never experience the gift of true friendship. They are excluded from this model because the cost of interdependency seems too high.

This model of service emerges when relationships between people and institutions are open to dynamic growth and transformation. Hope comes as individual examples create new possibilities for the transformation of institutional structures. There is always the danger that the ensuing conflict and tension will result in a call for a more stable model of service, one that will continue to dominate, oppress, and exclude many while espousing love and goodwill. Yet hope can be sustained when we see the signs of dynamic movement toward mutuality among us.

II. A Rereading of "Service" Texts

It seems to me that many Mennonite women have learned to sing a song of service that affirms subservience and submission or else duty and guilt.[8] This song is made up of a variety of melodies that communicated to us that our service was inadequate and meaningless, that we were not doing nearly enough nor denying ourselves enough. Or alternatively we were doing more than we should, creating dependency or interfering in another person's life.

This song is constructed from a variety of scriptural texts that have been connected to each other to form a complete hymn – a song that, though unsatisfying even to ourselves, we continue to sing for other people. Somehow we have forgotten that we have access to the raw materials, and that we too can contribute to the composition of the hymn we sing. We have forgotten that change need not come about by having an "ideal" song imposed from "above." Instead, each individual can initiate change by changing her own contribution to the song. One new note or different rhythm can disrupt a whole pattern of music. As others in the choir begin to hear the disruptive

melody being inserted, as they note a different harmonization or recognize a unique rhythm, they are invited to respond to those changes. Hope for a new song begins with that first small change that is deliberately made. Improvisation by others must then follow, because the music cannot go on as before.

In this section, I want to examine our old patterns of singing and to ask whether a new theology of service can be composed. I will reread key Scripture passages that have formed the pattern of notes we name our song of service, but in the context of our experience of service and in light of the models of service just examined. This step begins the formation of an alternative theology of service by disrupting our usual interpretations. It invites women to continue the process of interpretation by participating in the detailed historical analysis that is needed as well as in the ongoing hermeneutical process and conversation. As we do this we may be able to recognize the patterns that don't fit, or to discover new notes that should be included even when they at first sound dissonant. Perhaps we can yet compose a song that welcomes others into a choir of spontaneity and joy.

(1) Masters and slaves, husbands and wives, fathers and children, leaders and followers: Singing a subversive note in relationships of service "from beneath"

> Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. . . . Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. . . . Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. . . . Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ: not only while being watched, and in order to please them, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. Render service with enthusiasm, as to the Lord and not to men and women, knowing that whatever good we do, we will receive the same again from the Lord, whether we are slaves or free. And masters, do the same to them. Stop threatening them, for you know that both of you have the same Master in heaven and with him there is no partiality.(Excerpts from Eph.5-6)[9]

> But you are not to be called Rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father – the one in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted. . . .But woe to you, blind guides . . . hypocrites! (Excerpts from Matt. 23)

> "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you". . . . Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord. . . . My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant . . . for the Mighty One has done great things for me. . . ."(Excerpts from Luke 1-3)

Usually the words "be subject," "obey," and "service" jump out at us as we read the passage from Ephesians. We have often read those verses assuming that the writer is speaking primarily to the ones "beneath," telling them to obey and serve. Probably no passages have been used more often to ensure servanthood than this passage from Ephesians and parallel passages in Colossians and 1 Peter, often called the "Household Codes." Clearly, these imperatives fall into the "servitude model" since they assume a hierarchy where service happens from beneath, service in which women obey husbands, children obey parents, and servants obey masters. Throughout church history, those above have used these household codes to ensure service by those below. And that was easy to do, since the hierarchical pattern of relationships was assumed to be blessed by God, who took the highest place on this ladder.

Yet a more careful reading of the passage uncovers a subversive note that begins to disrupt the all-pervasive tone of servitude.[10] The assumption of ultimate loyalty to the one above is questioned. The passage suggests there is only one master whom you need to reverence and obey – that is God, shown in Christ Jesus. By implication this means that other so-called masters do not make the final evaluation of service you render. Though God is clearly understood as above humans in the divine/human relationship, this does not imply a God who demands service because it is his right. Instead, service is to a God who came to us in Christ, the very self-gift of God. This God shows no

partiality to any one class of humans. Both masters and slaves, both women and men must answer to God directly. Therefore, the phrase "be subject to one another" also begins to subvert the competition associated with the first model outlined in part I. Climbing to the top by trying to please the one above does not yet solve the problem of servitude.

However, is this enough? Has the writer understood the essence of service? Is he only *describing* the usual social hierarchy or is he *justifying* it? Is his relocation of ultimate loyalty strong enough to create a shift in these institutional relationships, especially if God is also seen as a Lord and Master whom one must obey without question?

The passage from Matthew is taken from one of the most angry, scathing speeches of Jesus. Over and over, he lashes out at the leaders, the Pharisees, who place burdens on people while they themselves seek honor and privilege. So angry is Jesus that he suggests that naming someone "boss" (whether a rabbi, a father, or an instructor) creates a situation in which that boss can rule over you. Instead, Jesus insists that only God is your master. Under God's reign all are students, all are children. Moreover, under God's reign the usual hierarchy will be turned upside down; the one on top will serve, the one at the bottom will be honored.

This passage disrupts the dominant social hierarchy much more radically than the Ephesians passage but does it with similar logic. Only God is above you, therefore you are equal. This implies that the usual categories of status and privilege no longer apply. Woe to those who insist that privilege based on status still applies when God is the ruler! Woe to those who are blind, who do not see the new, social/political situation that God is bringing! Woe to leaders who build their status in order that others should serve! But even more than that, this text assures the ones serving that, in the final analysis, the last shall be first and the first last. Insiders shall become outsiders; outsiders, insiders. In the longer view of Christ's eschatological reign, justice will prevail. And because we can begin to envision this new reality we can live without earthly masters. Is this enough to inject hope in those who live in servitude?

The third passage is a personal testimony of the joy that comes with true servanthood of God. According to Luke, Mary is overjoyed to be counted among the Servants of God, those to whom God has revealed Godself in a special way, those who have been chosen and empowered to serve God. Just

as the kings and prophets were called servants of God – she too would receive the power to do the task God had called her to. I believe her acceptance of the invitation to become the mother of Jesus was not coerced or forced. Instead, the Magnificat testifies to God's role in overthrowing the usual hierarchical relationships. Somehow she has experienced that in her calling to be the mother of Jesus.

As I reread these passages, I felt a sense of despair that throughout history, the Mennonite church has not listened to the subversion begun in them. Instead, the church has often used these verses to support the social patterns of a dominant culture by appealing to the Lordship of God. Leaders have insisted that menial service is for those at the bottom of the social scale, that sacrifice and the way of the cross are for those already serving from beneath. Service to God has been interpreted as part of this hierarchical pattern: God as the great "boss" in the sky insists on our service because it is his right to do so. Is this because masters were in control of the interpretation? Is it because it has been too difficult for slaves to live according to an inner freedom? Is it because personal autonomy can be reached only if status is bestowed by other humans? In any case, it seems that the revolutionary notion that only God the Creator is beyond us, that Christ is Lord, has not yet upset the hierarchies of servitude in the church.[11]

Perhaps a change of masters is not enough if we continue to serve "from beneath" with God on top of a domineering hierarchy. However, a subversive note sung by those considered weak can still be powerful enough to change the way God is described in the song. If those in servitude begin to sing this new description of God loudly even for themselves, they will begin to subvert the whole song. We know of the power of the songs of slaves who succeeded in moving toward external freedom by first claiming their own inner freedom and God's promise of the upside down kingdom. Giving our loyalty to God can relativize all other claims to superiority, beginning a larger song of liberation.

(2) Rich and poor, strong and weak, adults and children, healthy and sick: Singing a subversive note in relationships of service "from above"

> "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. . . . Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Then he took a child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me. . . . John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." But Jesus said, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. . . . For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward. . . You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served, but to give his life a ransom for many." (Excerpts from Mark 8-10)
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> Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it when we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." (Excerpt from Matt. 25)
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> But wanting to justify himself, [the lawyer] asked Jesus, "But who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was going to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, and went away leaving him half dead. . . a priest passed by. . . a Levite

> passed by. . . . But a Samaritan while traveling, came near him and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds. (Excerpt from Luke 10)

I was surprised at how differently I read this set of passages when I realized which model of service they assumed. If read in terms of the first model, by those who have little choice and are already at the bottom of the social scale, terms like "deny yourself," "take up your cross," "become a slave and servant" enforce servitude and suffering and justify domination and oppression. However, as I reread the verses in their larger literary context, I realized that these words are not addressed to those at the bottom of the social scale. The texts in Mark and Matthew are addressed to an inner circle of followers, particularly to the leadership group of twelve disciples, who had been empowered to heal and teach. The passage in Luke is addressed to a lawyer, someone with high status within his community. These words are spoken to leaders, and they address the temptations of those who would help the so-called "needy." The model assumed is service "from above." The passages in Mark are particularly interesting because small, seemingly insignificant incidents are placed side by side with comments by Jesus, that help us see the impact of those incidents. The disciples argue about who is the greatest, they send away children who wish to be blessed by Jesus, they are jealous of others who are also healing in the name of Jesus, they ask to have the highest places in glory. Jesus responds in a number of ways that subvert this view of service.

First of all, Jesus suggests that the kind of service he calls for can only be done through a denial of one's own selfish goals, such as gaining crowns in the kingdom or climbing higher on the social scale. Secondly, Jesus renames the "needy ones" as first in the kingdom. Welcoming a child is like welcoming their master, Jesus. Feeding the hungry or visiting those in prison is like doing this for a king. He also renames those doing the serving. They are not the ones usually named the servants of God, the Priests or Levites. Instead, they are the outsiders, the Samaritans, who recognize the neighbor in the wounded person from Judea. Stereotyping persons as "needy" or "givers" is rejected. Third, Jesus suggests that givers must also be receivers. I had always thought that the motto "in the name of Christ" came from a Scripture passage suggesting how followers of Christ were to give. Here Jesus turns this saying around and

suggests that whoever gives a cup of cold water to us – to the ones who bear the name of Christ, to the disciples – will not lose a reward. Here the disciples are the receivers who should respect the givers. Finally, Jesus addresses the temptation to control the service, to keep power within one's own circle, to exclude others from ministry by suggesting that we become as slaves. Be willing to *serve* in menial ways. He thus turns the values of leaders upside down, and asks them to truly serve others according to their need instead of only according to what the leaders wish to give.

Thus in a variety of ways, Jesus unmasks the face of service "from above," allowing us to see the power abuse that is possible in a ministry to those who have less. So, why have these verses so often been used to enforce servitude, rather than to unmask power moves? Maybe we need a different term which will not so easily hide the power dynamics involved in this kind of "service from above."

Does it make a difference if we understand these words as addressed *only* to those who serve because they have received much? Does it make a difference if we name the power they have to choose and make decisions about who is needy and whether they will meet that need? Will anything change if we reject the stereotyping that often accompanies this kind of giving? Can these stories be subversive enough so that those who have the power to exclude others from service or from being served will see themselves and their own need? Will it make any difference if the particular temptations that leaders have to misuse power, under the guise of altruism, are named? Perhaps I am most skeptical that this model can be changed because I can identify with it most readily. I know how difficult it is to be transformed at the core of our being so that the resources and power we have can be truly shared. However, I also know that a compassionate sharing of resources can begin to shift systems of oppression and domination.

Possibly the most subversive note that can be sung by those who serve from above is giving up the right to define the need of the other. Instead, true vulnerability comes when resources and need are named through conversation and dialogue in which both the one serving and the one in need can participate. This is a radical notion. Can you imagine the rich and poor together going through our closets to see which clothes should be shared? A song of mutuality can grow when room is given for this conversation. Melodies of service that

truly meet the need of the other can then be composed. Perhaps solidarity can come from this kind of compassionate and vulnerable service.

(3) Perfume and hair, basin and towel: symbols of mutual service within relationships of equal status

> Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. . . . Judas Iscariot, one of the disciples, . . . said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor? (Excerpt from John 12)
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> He [Jesus] poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet? . . . You will never wash my feet." (Excerpt from John 13)
>
> This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. . . . I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from the Father. (Excerpt from John 15)

The basin and towel have long been important symbols of service for Mennonites. These symbols have been used to suggest that we "let go of pride and worldly power" and that we "take on the role of servant" and "humbly" wash each other's feet as Jesus has done.[12] These symbols have been powerful for me as well, though with a slight difference in interpretation. Nine years ago at the first "Women Doing Theology" conference, I suggested there were actually two foot washings in the gospel of John.[13] The first occurs when Mary washes Jesus' feet with perfume and dries it with her hair. The second occurs when Jesus washes the feet of his disciples and dries them with a towel. It may be helpful to look again at these stories in terms of the models of service that we have outlined.

The best clue to the model that underlies these stories arises from the objections to the foot washings in each story. In the first one, Judas objects because Mary should have given the money to the poor. In other words, Mary is seen as a benefactor of the poor, as someone who normally serves from above. We know from the gospel of Luke that rich women gave of their resources to the disciple community around Jesus. Mary, Martha, and Lazarus seem to be from this group of benefactors – a comfortable arrangement for Judas who kept the books. But here Mary disrupts the comfortable social scale. She has recognized Jesus' need for love during this dangerous time in Jerusalem. She takes the perfume and washes Jesus feet, suggesting that this leader can also be needy. Even more daringly, with her intimate action Mary boldly enters the inner circle of disciples. Hierarchical boundaries between men and women are freely crossed. Though female, she claims her place as a disciple right beside Jesus. Mary serves from a place of equality, ignoring the status that others want to give her. And Jesus responds by receiving this love as it is given.

In the second story, just a chapter later and also at a supper, Jesus pours water in a basin and begins to wash his disciples' feet. Again there is a strong objection. Again it is a male disciple who objects. This time, Peter vigorously objects to the foot washing. To understand why, recall the customs of the time. Slaves usually brought in the basins and water, and the guests would wash their own feet. However, sometimes one person would voluntarily wash the feet of someone else, for example, a beloved rabbi, as a sign of deep love and respect. Again this was in intimate action, one reserved for close friends. Why did Peter object to this foot washing? Was it really because he did not want to do the same? Or was it because he had put Jesus on a false hierarchical pedestal, and was uncomfortable with the shift in an established social pattern that Jesus was suggesting? Peter has a model of relationships where there is a clear "above" and "below," each with clearly defined roles. Clearly, Jesus is above and Peter below. For Peter to wash Jesus' feet would have been fine in this situation. The model of service from below would be intact. However, Jesus upsets the expected normal roles. Peter cannot handle this confusion of social order, nor the level of intimacy suggested by this model.

These two stories together contribute to a model of service that is mutual. In these chapters in John, Jesus is described as deliberately moving from servanthood to friendship in his relationships with the disciples. Jesus is pictured as freely receiving service and freely giving service, both extended as a gift of love. "I no longer call you servants, but I have called you friends." Jesus is saying: My love for you has meant that I willingly give myself to you as a gift. I have shared my knowledge of God's will with you freely and lovingly. We are now in communion with each other, a communion in which service is not commanded but embraced. I long to receive this same kind of love from you. In fact, my hope is that this kind of mutual love can become the norm of service relationships within the community of followers, even after my death.

Again, a deep sadness fills me as I observe the hierarchical barriers dividing those within the church from each other, even when they serve. Yet I continue to hope. The symbols of perfume and hair, basin and towel continue to feed my imagination so that I can begin to envision a community in which solidarity and love overcome objections based on false social norms.

Conclusion

I wonder if the experience of mutuality in caring communities, pointed to by the symbol of foot washing, could prepare us to sing a subversive note in the many situations in which we find ourselves. Perhaps the predominant models of service can yet be disrupted and transformed. Perhaps the glimpse of God we have received through Jesus can move us to sing again of service as hospitality and freedom, as receiving and giving, as sharing and communion. It will take courage to sing that first tentative note, because that note will produce dissonance in the monotonous and mournful song of servitude and domination that we are used to. But perhaps, as we sing, we will be joined by others and the melody of service can create a dance of joy. May we embrace this hope as we invite each other to sing a song of friendship and solidarity.

Notes

[1] Sandra M. Schneiders, "The Footwashing (John 13: 1-20): An Experiment in Hermeneutics," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 43.1 (January 1981), 84.
[2] A basic description by Sandra Schneiders of these three models has been the main stimulation for this discussion.
[3] The length of this essay precludes an analysis of power as understood and practiced in the Mennonite community. For a helpful discussion see Benjamin W. Redekop and Calvin W. Redekop, eds. *Power, Authority and the Anabaptist Tradition* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 2001).
[4] Schneiders differentiates notions of equality in her article, "Evangelical Equality and Religious Consecration, Mission, and Witness," *Spirituality Today* 38.4 (Winter 1986), 293-302.
[5] Schneiders, "The Footwashing," 85.
[6] See Robert K. Greenleaf, *On Becoming a Servant-Leader* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1996) for an example.
[7] See "Keeping the Balance. . . Staying Healthy as Helpers," *Women's Concerns Report* No. 115 (July-August 1994).
[8] See Nadine Pence Frantz, ed., "Women Bearing the Cross of Discipleship," *Women's Concerns Report 89* (March-April 1990) as an example of the struggle women have with a Mennonite theology of service that has been most directly connected to cross-bearing and suffering.
[9] All biblical quotations are from the NRSV.
[10] John Howard Yoder has also suggested that these passages relativize and undercut the order of the society of the time. See *The Politics of Jesus*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994). However, Yoder focuses on "revolutionary subordination," suggesting that overdoing the celebration of liberation was the problem and that the "tactic" of subordination is crucial in these passages. I submit that the tactic was limited to Paul's human insights, and that the more crucial theological and ethical insight was the limit put on the hierarchical structures by suggesting that only God is truly the master.
[11] Interestingly enough, the notion of Mennonite "voluntary service" was originally a way for Mennonites to respond to a demand for service that assumed a servitude model. The U.S. and Canadian governments assumed that they had the right to ask every male citizen to serve in the army. The Mennonite church argued for "alternative" ways of service such as in psychiatric hospitals or forestry units so that young men could serve both country and God.
[12] *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottdale, PA and Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1996), 53-54.
[13] "Biblical Interpretation: A Praxis of Discipleship?" *The Conrad Grebel Review* 10.1 (Winter 1992), 17-32.