

ADDRESSING DIVERSITY AND PROMOTING RECONCILIATION THROUGH SERVICE TO OTHERS

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This is our Lord's solution to the puzzle of how to address diversity and promote reconciliation. Jesus served those who inhabited His world. The Bible is full of examples of this. In the Gospel of John, chapter two, Jesus changed water to wine thus sparing the newlyweds a very embarrassing start to a new life together. In chapter 4 he brings salvation to the woman at the well, a despised Samaritan adulteress, and to many in her village and in Cana of Galilee He heals the sick son of a royal official. In chapter five Christ heals a lame man near the pool called Bethesda, and in chapter six Jesus feeds a large crowd of about five thousand hungry people with five barley loaves and two small fish. Chapter nine finds Him restoring sight to a man blind from birth, and He raises Lazarus from death and comforts Mary and Martha, Lazarus' sisters, in chapter eleven. In chapter twelve we find Christ washing the disciples' feet, and in chapter nineteen even as He is near death on the cross, He is thinking of Mary, His mother, when He asks John, one of His disciples to care for her. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are similar in that they also contain example after example of Christ serving others, putting their welfare before His own. And His ultimate service was to give His life so that all humanity could be forgiven and reconciled to God, the Father, and Creator of all that is, has been, and will be. The Apostle Paul in his letter to the Church he founded in Philippi summarizes Christ's life with these words from chapter two: *"¹ Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, ² then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. ³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, ⁴ not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. ⁵ In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: ⁶ Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; ⁷ rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! ⁹ Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is*

above every name,¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,¹¹ and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” [NIV]

To serve in the context of this paper means to place the needs of another person/group/community above your own needs and desires. Service to others can take many forms. It can be as simple as opening a door for someone whose hands are full or it can be a lifetime commitment as exemplified by Mother Teresa. It can be verbal; it is often non-verbal as in a smile, a wave, or a hug. It may be physical labor; it can be mentally challenging and rewarding. It may be doing something you enjoy and are good at; it may be very difficult and accompanied by feelings of inadequacy and ineptitude. It can occur in your own back yard; it may take you to the far sides of the earth. It may be an individual acting alone; it can be hundreds, even thousands of people joining together to accomplish the goal. Regardless, it will always begin with the individual recognizing the need and then acting to meet the need. And you cannot recognize someone else’s need if you are focused on yourself.

In my own life as I have attempted to follow the example of Christ Jesus I have discovered that to give to others is to give to God, and you cannot out give God. Regardless of the situation I always go away feeling that I have received so much more than I gave. From Katrina I learned that people who have survived a disaster need to talk about their experiences; to tell their story is very much a part of the healing process, and sitting and listening intently to their story is more important than filling a dumpster with debris or driving nails into studs. One Friday evening in a Ocean Springs, Mississippi neighborhood at a backyard barbeque as the group I was with celebrated a week of successful reconstruction on several houses, I entered the house to refill my tea glass, and I encountered a group of local women sitting around the dining table. I made the statement that I had heard the stories of the men who had lived through the event, but I hadn’t heard the women’s stories, and asked if anyone would like to share. One woman challenged me by asking not once but twice if I really wanted to hear her story, and when I assured her that I did, this is what she said. “Unlike some folks we evacuated before Katrina hit and came home to find that the water rose to a height of twenty two feet in our two-story home. We lost all our possessions and the house had to be stripped down to bare stud walls. But we were insured so

we hired a contractor and began to rebuild. It's been over a year now since Katrina hit, and we still don't have any sheetrock hung. Today my husband and I discovered that our contractor has skipped town with over forty thousand dollars of our insurance money, and this afternoon my doctor told me that I have breast cancer. That's my story!"

Suddenly all my sawing and nailing of the past five days didn't seem so important. I was glad that I had acted on God's nudge to ask the question and intently listen. But what could I offer? A hug and a promise to pray seemed woefully inadequate. But God reminded me that while offering my carpentry skills was helpful to others, listening to this lady's story was the more important offering because it started her healing as it acknowledged her existence and importance as a child of God when she wasn't feeling important or loved, just abandoned, alone, sad, and scared.

Within the United Methodist Church there is much and great diversity. In my own church with a membership just over one hundred and fifty people most of the congregation are of retirement age. But we do have a few youth and young adults and the occasional infant or toddler. Many of us have moved into the area within the past decade, but there are several families who are long time members. Some of our members are seasonal. And over one third of the congregation has joined within the past two and a half years. Until two years ago we were served by either retired or student pastors. We are no longer a small country church, but we often exhibit small church thinking. There is much that can separate us. Yet we have the reputation of being a very loving and accepting church where everyone feels loved and at home. We operate a mission garden that last year produced over thirty thousand pounds of fresh vegetables for distribution through the local food pantry. And we support a non-profit thrift store that is open six days a week to serve the community, with an all volunteer staff. We recently completed construction of a new fellowship hall that more than doubled our facility's square footage and the renovation of the old hall into eight classrooms and offices in spite of overwhelming obstacles. Our youth volunteer monthly at a nearby retirement home and participate in a summer mission trip. Our worship services are often quite full and we need to expand our sanctuary or add an additional service.

How can we accomplish so much given our size? We are blessed with individuals who are willing to serve others. And in serving others all those things that make us different lose their power to divide us as we work toward a common goal, whether it's feeding and clothing the homeless or folding Sunday's worship bulletin. Although we are a diverse congregation, through service to others we are reconciled to one another and to God. So my challenge to you is to pray (prayer is a form of service), look around you for a need (focus outwardly), and then act to fill the need through serving in whatever way you can, and you will discover that you have the mindset of Christ Jesus. May it be so!