

Why do I have a problem with the word 'service' and the image of 'servant' for diaconal ministry?

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One of the recent booklets on diaconal ministry says, "Service, in reference to diaconal ministry, is based on the biblical notion of diakonia, as expressed through the story of Jesus washing the disciples' feet...." I think the image of Jesus washing the disciples' feet and asking them to do likewise to each other is a very provocative action taken against the reality of hierarchical power. What I see in his action is the moment of Jesus being liberated from his own power as a male Jewish teacher. I no longer think of it as a self-emptying of power anymore because this action does not change his social status. And I wonder whether his action was really for his disciples' needs or his own. When Peter refused to be washed Jesus almost threatens him saying, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." I wonder whether Jesus really broke the boundary of power relationships with his action. I think his act of washing others' feet was powerful for himself and could be provocative as a teaching tool in his context, but I am not sure it was the best way to empower his disciples.

"I am among you to serve" (Luke 22:27)... one of the brochures uses these words to support diaconal ministry. We can imagine it must have been a very shocking, unconventional thing to say to the disciples because the world they lived in was clearly divided into the classes of servant and lord and their clearly defined roles. I am guessing that in this unexpected word and action in that society, he meant to show how to build a more loving, respectful and more equal community without the traditional class division between human beings.

In today's context, his action and words cannot be understood literally. We know that taking on the role of servant and behaving like a servant by bending the knee would not change our own social status. Our focus is on creating a more just world, in which neither we nor anyone else bends the knee to a lower class or tiptoes to the powerful. In John 15:12, Jesus calls us "friend," not any more "servant." Thus, we try to be friends with both people who are living with too little or too much. If we keep using the word "servanthood," to me it affirms the unjust relationships in which we have been living. It also contradicts our favourite word 'mutuality'. We can choose to bend the knee or tiptoe to the powerful whenever we like; that reflects a power which we cannot deny. It has been a

long struggle for me to understand my privilege to choose in contrast to others who must live by bending the knee without choice. I think Jesus' serving actions need to be understood as expressing his vision and dream of creating just relationships.

In the Biblical story of washing the disciples' feet, there is always one who offers service and another who receives. It almost always goes in one direction. This is not my understanding of diaconal ministry. For example, in the relationship between the Syrophenician woman and Jesus where he is also challenged and changed by the woman, we learn about creating community. I believe diaconal ministry has been challenged, changed and reshaped in the midst of working in community where all participants are challenged and reshaped by the community.

I prefer, in my present journey to understand the diaconate, to use and hear "ministry" rather than service as we translate the Greek word -- diakonia, and the words 'partnership' and 'friendship' rather than 'servanthood'. I don't think I am alone in this thinking. I hope this reflection open opportunities for further discussion. What do you think?