

The Message and the Mission

Service Sunday I

1st Corinthians 9:16-23

CWZepp, BWCOB, February 5, 2012

As a youth growing up in the Hagerstown Church of the Brethren, I was exposed early and often to inspirational stories of persons who gave of themselves in lives of service. From great Brethren heroes like Dan West and John Kline, to the behind the scenes faithful of our local congregation, I was immersed in the testimony of faith in action. Several memories stand out. One is of the couple who, in addition to serving as quiet but influential youth advisors, were known for their ministry of service to Vietnamese refugees. Another memory is of the group of people from the congregation who showed up on our farm when my father was laid up with a bad back to help my mother with the farm work. Most of them had no idea what they were doing on a farm, but their willingness to serve my family in a time of need, even beyond their comfort zones, remains a powerful witness from my formative years. And of course, as an active youth in the Church of the Brethren, both locally and in the district and denomination, I heard often the call to serve.

But it was Dick Smith, a retired minister in our congregation who would become my first mentor as a licensed minister, who left the biggest and most lasting impression on me, and it was he who is most responsible for my commitment to and theology of service. In truth, I don't remember the exact moment when Dick first encouraged me along with the other youth of the church to consider committing to give a year or more of our lives in BVS. But it was a message that, for whatever reason, got through to me. And from my youth, I knew that I was going to give at least a year of my life in volunteer service.

Lucky for me, I met a woman who had been likewise shaped by the Brethren service ethic. When Amanda and I were married, it was with a shared commitment to volunteer for at least a year together before we "settled down." Which is how we ended up living in Massachusetts one year later. For a year, we volunteered at Gould Farm, a residential therapeutic community and working farm dedicated to helping adults with mental illness move toward recovery and health. I served primarily as a work leader on the farm and Amanda served mainly on the residential support team. It was a significant time for us. In addition to the satisfaction of knowing that we were giving one of the "best years of our life" in service to something greater than ourselves, and to working and walking with individuals in various life situations and needs at the farm, we also gained much personally for the experience. We learned about ourselves and each other. We had time and space to discern a clearer direction for our future. And we learned a lot about living in community.

But as I have reflected on our year of service in recent weeks and months, I have realized that perhaps the most significant learning for me during that time was that service is not ultimately something that you do. Rather it's a part of who you are, a part ingrained in your identity that needs to give of itself, that needs to reach out to others. It's a way of life, not just a time in your life. It's not something you can turn on and off, not something that you do on evenings or weekends when you aren't working, not something that you do only on certain days or weeks

or years of your life. Rather, it IS your life. And for me, perhaps the biggest thing that I got out of my year of volunteer service, was a renewed calling to a life of service.

As I look at my own story of service, I know that it was not something I was told or something I learned in Sunday School or youth group that nurtured that call to service in my life. Rather it was the witness of countless people around me, who showed by the manner of their living what it meant to serve in faith. It was stories of real people who gave of themselves for others and for the sake of the gospel.

And that is why today, on the first of three Sundays on which we will be focusing on service, instead of preaching, I wanted us to hear some of our own stories – the stories of some among us whose lives have been shaped by service. Because it does not mean the same thing for all of us. But like Paul in the scripture we read today, we all have an obligation laid on us, to serve the kingdom with our lives. We will all do that in different ways, but ultimately, the message and the mission should be the same – the good news of Jesus, for all people. Quite simply, that is the message that shapes us, and the mission we serve. And as we all live and serve the message and the mission, like Paul, we may find that we share in its blessings, and we'll continue to add chapters to our own stories of service