
SERVING

Becoming Like Christ to Others

*“‘You are my servant’;
I have chosen you and have not rejected you.”*

ISAIAH 41:9

The following story is told by Ted Engstrom, former president of World Vision. It's a wonderful example of what someone did to try to get the perspective of another (perspective taking) and use it for serving others.

Pat Moore, who looked eighty-five years old, ventured into an unusual journey of an assumed identity. In reality she was twenty-six years old, attractive with a good job in industrial design. Her makeover into an elderly person, with all the characteristics of frailty, including a cane, fooled everyone. Pat had a longstanding concern for the aged and was now going to see what it was like—as best she could. Ted writes:

For at least once each week for the next three years, “85-year-old” Pat put on her masquerade of facial latex foam, a heavy fabric that bound her body, and a convincing gray wig. She visited fourteen states as an old woman. She met hundreds of people who never once discovered her true identity.

Remember the old saying that we never really know the needs of another until we've walked a mile in his or her moccasins? That is precisely what Pat Moore did for 36 months. She developed such

a sensitivity for the aged in our midst that she actually started to “feel” old. Her experiment was the consummate definition of complete identification with other.

Pat’s successful attempt to get in touch with the needs of the aged is a living example of a vital principle in learning and living the fine art of friendship: *Always treat others as equals*.

This principle obviously does not apply only to the aged. There also needs to be a greater sense of mutual respect among the races, the sexes, our competitors, and our bosses or employees.

But would we not live wiser, happier and more fulfilled lives if we enjoyed each other for what the other person is? Young or old, black or white, rich or poor, adult or child? Treating others as equals is a keystone in learning how to be a friend.¹

Regarding “treating others as equals,” sometimes those of us from the West communicate something slightly different: “I will treat you as an equal if you treat me as your superior.” We need to guard our ways so that the servant spirit we wish to portray is accurately perceived by others.

Pat entered the culture of the elderly and experienced exactly what it was like to be old. This is what Jesus did in the incarnation. He lived among humans for over thirty years. And he knew what he had to do to serve the human race: he had to die. But between the time of his birth and death, especially during the three years of his public ministry, he served in two ways: (1) calling people to repentance and faith, and (2) doing good. These are neither mutually exclusive nor necessarily attached. That is, we may do good *and* also share our faith. Or we may do good *but not* feel led to share our faith—at that time. It’s not wise to exclusively do one or the other. The Scripture seems clear that we are to witness in word *and* deed, and thus serve people in both their eternal and temporal needs.

DEFINITION OF SERVING

Serving is *the ability to relate to people in such a way that their dignity as human beings is affirmed and they are more empowered to live God-glorifying lives*. First, serving always includes relationships, even if brief. Second, the servant respects those served because of their God-given dignity. Third, the persons served feel empowered because they have encountered Jesus, whether they consciously recognize him or not. They may feel respected, challenged or even confronted. Whatever the case, they feel empowered to replicate the good brought to them. Anytime we relate to others in a way that leads them to sense Jesus' presence or consider his claims, God is pleased. Jesus' followers are called to be Jesus to every human being—to serve as he served.

Serving without understanding creates confusion or worse. With the help of a cane an old Filipina woman hobbled down into the ditch alongside a road on the outskirts of Manila. An American woman watched with interest from a distance. It appeared that the old woman was in some trouble. The American woman hurried to the ditch and anxiously looked down. Sure enough the old woman appeared to be in agony, her face full of pain as she squatted in the ditch. The American woman went down the embankment to render assistance. As the woman got close, the old woman began waving her cane in a threatening manner while firing off verbal assaults. Confused but determined not to leave this suffering woman, the American good Samaritan examined the situation more closely. Only then did she realize that the old woman was having her daily "bathroom" visit and was not in need of any outside assistance.²

Obviously this was an innocent mistake. The American woman detected one more thread in the cultural tapestry, one more piece in the cultural puzzle. Now she knows how to interpret certain behaviors in the Philippines and will be wiser and a bit more understanding. Nonetheless, we should never hesitate to help if it seems someone is in need.

It may turn out a bit embarrassing, but sometimes the best learning comes from experience.

Americans aren't the only ones who do embarrassing things. An Asian girl, new to the West, was becoming weary and bored standing in a crowded train. She did what was perfectly acceptable in her home culture: she rested her chin on the shoulder of the stranger in front of her. The shocked look she received told her this was not a common practice in her new culture.³

A "Herman" cartoon reveals how lack of understanding can cause a serious problem. The scene is a prison cell. The prisoner is sitting on the floor with arms and hands tightly shackled to the wall. His outstretched feet are shackled to the floor. Then the reader's eye catches the handsaw that is cutting a hole in the floor from below to help the prisoner escape. But the person with the handsaw, not being able to see the prisoner, is unwittingly going to saw through the prisoner's legs.⁴

Though we can't see the person with the saw, it's clear that he or she is a good friend, courageous and willing to risk a lot for the prisoner. However, if the friend is successful in cutting the hole, there are dire consequences for the prisoner. The message is clear: it's difficult to serve someone unless you understand their context.

Serving while disciplining. One of my former students worked among New York teenagers who lived mostly on the street. Part of his ministry was supervising teens who came into the shelter for rehabilitation. One difficulty was how to enforce the rules without appearing superior. One day, when a boy had broken a rule, the predetermined punishment was scraping gum off the sidewalk. This was particularly humiliating because his old street buddies might see him—rubbing salt in the wound.

The supervisor, required to enforce the rules, thought hard about how to escape the serious downside to this punishment. Finally he gave the teen a putty knife and led him out to the sidewalk. Then, before the

teen was able to kneel down and begin scraping the gum off the sidewalk, the supervisor pulled out a putty knife from his back pocket, kneeled down and started scraping.

Servanthood takes different forms, depending on the situation. That is why it can't be legislated, formulated or scripted in any detail. It is, after all, an attitude that, when embedded within us, finds an appropriate way to express itself in every situation. If it isn't an expression of who we are, it will come across as artificial and false.

FORGIVENESS: CHINESE AND AMERICAN STYLES

I had been giving a series of lectures at a Hawaiian university. After I had spoken on cultural values and illustrated one point on forgiveness, an articulate woman from Singapore approached me. She began to rehearse pieces of her past life with her father. He had made mistakes that had hurt her. "I pushed him and pushed him just to say, 'I'm sorry,' but he never would. If he would just say those words, then everything would be all right. I was so upset because he would never say the words," she declared with emotion.

"Often he would want to give me gifts, and I would refuse to accept them until he said he was sorry. He would offer to do other things for me, and I would always refuse until he said the words. Sometimes he would ask me to do a favor for him, and I would say "no, not until you apologize," she continued.

Several times during this conversation she would identify herself as all-American even though she was born and grew up in Singapore. She had largely rejected her Singaporean cultural values and adopted American values in a wholesale way. Thus, she appeared "all-American."

The young woman adamantly insisted that she must hear the words "I'm sorry" from her father in order for forgiveness to be genuine and the relationship to be restored. Through the years she had not budged on her demands, and her father, still in Singapore, was equally intractable. By re-

fusing his gifts and refusing to do anything for him as a good daughter would, she was punishing him and trying to force change in her father. So far both remained stubbornly entrenched in their positions. The relationship had suffered under this strain for a number of years.

It seemed to exhaust her to tell the story. I affirmed her desire to have a renewed relationship with her father. Gently I suggested that maybe her father *was* expressing his sorrow by the gifts he was offering. Maybe he was saying that he wanted a father-daughter relationship by making the kinds of requests that fathers would make of daughters when all is well between them. I told her that in the West, forgiveness (saying “I’m sorry”) is a verbal exchange. In many other cultures an apology and forgiveness are expressed through actions. “Maybe your father has been expressing his apology by the acts of gift-giving and asking favors, and you have been refusing it,” I offered. Her eyes stared into space as this new idea penetrated deeply into her mind.

I continued, “You are asking him to become like you, like the Western culture you have adopted. Maybe you need to let him speak out of his own cultural context. You are asking him to do something that is very foreign and uncomfortable within his culture. He may be saying ‘I’m sorry’ very loudly and sincerely, but the Western ears you have adopted are unable to hear it.”

She had mentioned to me earlier that her father was not a Christian in spite of her long-time witness. Now I began to wonder. At some risk I raised a question: “Is it possible that your father continues to reject Christianity because he sees it as becoming like the Westerners? Do you think he believes that to become a Christian he must reject his cultural heritage and become like a foreigner—an American?” The thought seemed to paralyze her. Her jaw slowly dropped and her eyes again stared into space. Absorbed in silence for a moment she reentered the conversation, pensively saying, “I must think about that.”

That evening before the next session, she came and asked how she

could rebuild her relationship with her father. This difficult but important decision would set her in a new direction because now she would enter her father's world on his cultural terms and try to see through his cultural lenses. Her newfound openness would demonstrate acceptance toward her father. Previously she could accept him only on her American terms. Now she would accept him as Singaporean. The next question focused on trust: what would rebuild trust in a way her father would understand it from his Chinese culture. Rather than force her father into her Western ways, she would try to fit into his Chinese ways, acting and reacting from his cultural frame of reference. She well understood Chinese culture, but she had rejected it as totally pagan. She had failed in trying to serve her father from her Western frame of reference. Now she resolved to serve her father from his frame of reference. That is how we truly serve.

GOING BACKWARDS MAKES THE MOST SENSE

The servanthood model has progressed along the following steps: openness, acceptance, trust, learning, understanding, serving. The model has evolved over a decade of talks with church leaders around the world, reading the Scriptures with special attention to the life of Jesus and careful examination of God's truth as found in the social science and cross-cultural communications literature. The model has been field tested in about twenty countries, and you are reading the insights of hundreds of people who have contributed to it. Now, we look at the model backwards because, as you will see, it makes the most sense that way. So please read the next piece carefully to see whether all this creates a richer perspective for you.

Serving. You can't serve someone you don't understand. At best you can only be a benevolent oppressor—like forcing someone to say “I'm sorry” when that is an unnatural way to apologize.

Understanding. You can't understand another person until you have

learned *from* them and, eventually, *with* them. A learning attitude signals humility and a willingness to identify with the people.

Learning. You can't learn from another person until you have built trust with them. People won't share important information with someone they don't trust, especially cross-culturally.

Trust. You can't build trust with another person until they feel like they have been accepted by you—until they feel that you value them as human beings.

Acceptance. You can't communicate value and esteem to others unless they feel welcomed into your presence and find themselves feeling safe—openness.

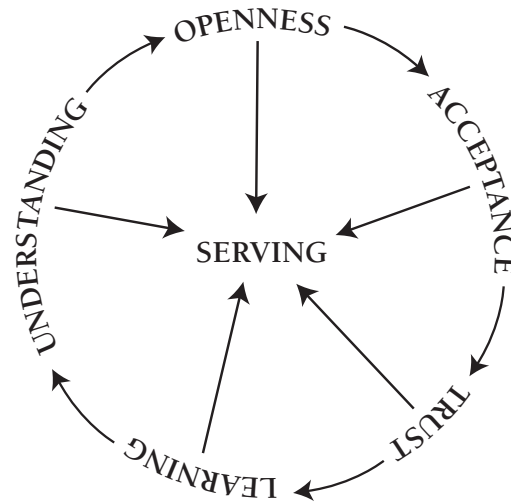
Openness. Openness with people of another culture requires that you are willing to step out of your comfort zone to initiate and sustain relationships in a context of cultural differences. While requiring some risk, it launches you on the wonderful and fruitful pilgrimage to servanthood.

Openness is rooted deeply in our view of the God who welcomes sinners and accepts them as bearers of his image; thus each person possesses a sacred dignity—the kind of dignity that compels us to also welcome others into our lives.

But we are not yet done with the model. People from other cultures who have seen the model made similar observations: The model's content is good, and it addresses issues that Westerners need to hear to be servants in our culture. However, its linear format may work for you people in the West, but it's not how our minds work. To make the model work for us, you must think in circular terms.

When I asked them to explain what they meant, they invariably came up with a schema that more comfortably fit their cultural way of thinking—an integrative circular model.

They didn't think of serving as being at the end of a progression of steps but as something that was happening whenever we are open, accepting, trusting, learning and understanding. Furthermore, they didn't



see the need to start with openness, though that is a logical place (for me) to start. A person could start serving just by learning from others. Later the person could show openness, get understanding, build trust and communicate acceptance.

The imagery used was similar to a pinball machine—serving others is like a pinball, always bouncing back and forth between the posts and bumpers (openness, understanding, trust, learning and acceptance), not always knowing what was next but appropriately responding to the situation by being ready to display the servant spirit wherever you were. Their integrative circular ideas are wonderful and probably better reflect reality. But I still like my linear approach; it helps me make sense of the servant process in my Western way of thinking. However, for a growing number of people in the West and for most of the people in the Two-Thirds World, the circular model may make more sense. I am deeply indebted to those who taught me and patiently helped me see the circular model's advantages. Use the model that works best for you.