

Faith Mennonite Church
Lent 2 – March 8, 2009
Pat Eliason

Service: Denying Self or Celebrating?
Genesis 17:1-7; Mark 8:31-38

When I first agreed to do this reflection, I envisioned a great masterpiece that I would work on and refine all week long. But then I got sick last weekend, so what you're getting is a first draft of thoughts that I wrote down late in one night...but then, it's good to lower our standards sometimes, right? And the time change on top of that.

Joetta asked me to reflect on the theme for today of service. When Joetta and I met last week to go over the lectionary together, I was struck immediately by the words in Mark: "If any want to be my followers, let them deny themselves..." This idea of "denying ourselves" raises a very big red flag for us as women. We discussed concepts similar to this in our Adult Sunday School class on the Bible and feminism. Verses like this can be used to reinforce subservience in women who are already cast into that role by sexism. We have traditionally been told by society to define ourselves in terms of the roles we fulfill for others: daughter, wife, mother.

Virginia Wiles, one of the authors included in the book we used for our class, wrote about a woman seminary student who was "everything the church had trained her to be...a competent young woman...[who had] assigned such ultimacy to her relationships that her identity—her beliefs, her emotions, her actions—[had been] utterly determined by her family, her friends, and her faith community." She had denied herself, and she had no true sense of self, other than who she was for others.

The quandary, according to Wiles, is that there is no parable for a woman to see her way out of this "enmeshment", this entanglement of our identity all wrapped up in and dependent on others. For men, there is the parable of the prodigal son. His sin is his pride, which causes him to leave his home and relationships, but in the process of doing so he establishes his own self. Psychologists recognize this process of breaking away as a "healthy" and "natural" part of development. Wiles states, "Stereotypically, [boys are] encouraged to choose self, even at the cost of the destruction of the relationship; [girls are] encouraged to choose the relationship, even at the cost of the destruction of self." Then, unfortunately, scripture such as the verse in Mark can be interpreted in a way that reinforces the idea that loss of self, now termed "denial," is normal for women, and even a virtue. There is no role model for women, no story similar to that of the prodigal son, who is by the way eventually welcomed back home, with relationships restored, his sin of pride forgiven and his sense of self firmly established.

If we as women do want to assert ourselves, if we reject this idea of "denial of our self," do we too, like the prodigal son, have to reject the relationships we find ourselves enmeshed in—to run away from home? There are some great fantasy novels that have plots like that; one I really enjoyed by Anne Tyler is called *The Ladder of Years*, where the woman in mid-life crisis walks away from her family, with all their petty demands and problems, while they are at the beach together. She has nothing but the clothes on her back and her purse, and she sets herself up in a new job, in a new town, under a new name, and takes her own time before telling anyone where she now lives and works. There have been times in my own life where I entertained serious

fantasies about doing something similar, maybe just getting on a plane to Hawaii and disappearing without telling anyone where I was until I felt good and ready to come out of hiding, maybe years down the road.

But Wiles points to women like Carol Gilligan, whose 1982 book *In a Different Voice* began to expose the failures of psychologists to identify patterns of behavior that are normal for women. Instead of having to conform to what is seen as “normal” for men, instead of feeling that we necessarily have to leave our primary relationships in order to find ourselves, women need the confidence to be who we are within those relationships; in Wiles’ words, the “freedom of seeing that [our] individual identit[ies] both challenge and nurture those relationships that are so important.”

So what, then, does service to others mean in this context? When Joetta first asked me to speak about my service this past Christmas in Jamaica, my first reaction was to say to her, “But that wasn’t really service, that was more self-interest!” After several winters of being overwhelmed by seasonal depression, I knew that I either had to get out of Minnesota and get some time in the sun during mid-winter, or move south. With almost all of my immediate family and a lifetime of friends, not to mention a job I like, here, moving is not an attractive option. But I also really dislike being a tourist. I desperately searched online for some kind of short term volunteer work, but most required at least a couple of months time commitment, and I was thinking more like ten days. Finally by word of mouth I heard of the Robin’s Nest Children’s Home in Jamaica. My friend Roseann and I signed on, knowing almost nothing other than what we read on their website. But it was a wonderful ten days of brilliant sun, lush vegetation and time spent with thirty-one children competing for our laps whenever we sat anywhere. We had a blast. So was that service, or was I being served? I guess both. I thought it was a fun place to spend time, but I have talked to people since then who don’t think that being around 31 children 24/7 sounds like much fun, for some reason...then I started to think that yes, I was also giving back by being there.

Joetta recalled that Frederick Buechner, an author on spirituality and vocation, said that “our calling is the place where our deepest joy and the world’s greatest need intersect.” Service in the best sense, then, is perhaps not that done out of denial as much as service that meets our own needs as well.

In closing this reflection on this Sunday theme of service, Joetta and I started to list all the service we could come up with, just off the top of our heads, reflecting the many gifts in this congregation. By being a part of this congregation, we support each other in the many forms of service we all do:

Joetta and Gerald and their family with MCC in Nicaragua and Honduras

Darrell and Cynthia with MCC in Congo/Zaire

Arlene Geissinger giving a year of service at Lutheran Social Services of MN, where I first met her

Glenn Geissinger and his service to the MCC sale

Yeshe directing the Books for Gimbi library project

Andi Kuenning working for MCC in Brazil, and at 10,000 Villages
Karen and Anna's volunteer work for Families Moving Forward
Dick and Sandra Westby's service in the Seward neighborhood
Mike Schrock's taking the FMC boys to the BWA each summer
Mike's Dad Dellis, working with Presbyterian Disaster Service in LA at the time of his death
Erin and her work with ARC
Susan Weinlick and her volunteer work for animal welfare
Hermann's work on homelessness issues, including MICAH, and Project Success
Aryn Baxter working right now in Rwanda
Pierre's work with CPT in Colombia
Alisa Bardo-Martinson's work with Lutheran Volunteer Corps in Washington, D.C.
Andy and his work crew of students doing service on MLK day
Gabe Schlabach working with MCC as a legislative assistant in Washington, D.C. this year
Cindy Bjork volunteering with Families Moving Forward Day Center, and the Literacy Council
Thaine Dirks and the MCC Sale board
Marian Heinrichs' work with Mano a Mano and the Bolivian exchange
Matthew Hendricks' work on a bike path for commuters in Minneapolis
Katie Hochstedler's work with Open Arms Minnesota
Arlene Holdeman's work with Literacy Volunteers
Joan Kreider organizing the Crop Walk and canoeing for the Mississippi with Noah
Dan Leisen's pro bono design work
Candace and Phil's work with the Fellowship of Reconciliation and Peace training
Donna Minter's volunteering as a Big Sister and her organization "Fun, Fitness and Philanthropy"
Neil Okerlund's work on various music-related boards
Gregg Richardson's work with Community Council and the Coop Board
Hillary Richardson's social justice work in Argentina

The FMC youth and their summer work as DOOR volunteers in Chicago, and in San Jose at the Center for the Blind

John, Kristen and Nicole with MCC in British Colombia

Melissa Falb, Rachel Hoskins, Donna Minter, Teresa Wasick, and Bob Mack with Wilderness Wind

Tom Johnson with Peace Corps in Sierre Leone

Carol Harder gathering produce and putting up local food last summer

And those are just the ones that popped into our heads as we brainstormed for a few minutes. There are many, many more services and more of you that I haven't named. Let us give thanks that we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, and that we can serve with joy in ways that also nourish and fulfill ourselves. Amen.