



A BLESSED EXCHANGE

Laura Fowler

Ministry for me has not been an easy thing to define. In fact, for over ten years I have been in the classroom of the Spirit, learning about ministry from the Teacher, and still I don't have a ministry with a simple title describing what I'm called to, like "youth ministry," although there are ways God has led me to minister to youth. I don't have a "jail ministry," although God has led me to minister in the jails. I'm not the coordinator of a "teenage mother program" either, although God has led me to minister to a young mother. Maybe I'll never have a ministry with a title, but one thing that is a common thread through it all is relationship with God and relationship with others. Years before I moved here God was teaching me about this aspect of relationship in ministry. I did not suspect that God would ask me to relocate my family and uproot my white, middle-class existence to receive and share God's love in a more concentrated way.

There are two aspects of relationship that are key to any ministry one might have, ones I find necessary and valuable.

The first aspect of relationship I've found important for me is to identify myself with the person or persons God has called me to serve. I can always count on the fact that I am dealing with someone different from myself—that is always clear. Without a genuine sense of mutuality, imposing *my* agenda or what *I* think needs to happen, no matter how "godly" my solutions or suggestions, is a sure way of creating a gulf between me

and the people or person I'm with. In order to have permission to enter someone's life or a people group, I must allow the Spirit to create a climate of equality. I do this by knowing inside of myself that I am no better or worth more than *anyone* and I try to identify any of those sneaky attitudes within myself while I'm interacting with the person. I do this by remaining conscious of my own brokenness, my own poverty, my own weaknesses, my racism and classism as I have the extreme privilege of entering someone's life. Generally it doesn't take long for someone, regardless of color, economic level, or status, to sense a commonness even though there are obvious differences that would normally separate us. This little bit of instruction from Paul has served me well through the years: as I go to others it must be ". . . in a spirit of gentleness, not forgetting that (I) may be tempted (myself)" (Gal. 6:1).

Secondly, I must let myself be served. This part of relationship is *absolutely* necessary. In my college years, I was fervent about being the kind of servant Jesus wanted me to be. I basically understood this as giving, so I gave and gave and gave. In those early days I didn't want to have to count on anyone or ask anyone for help. Having the "giver" mentality aided me in maintaining this arrogant attitude. "Look, I'm being so benevolent because I don't need anything in return." Often my relationships were very parental because I had not learned that other people have things to give and give to *me*. And by my refusal to receive from

them I was denying someone the opportunity to feel the sense of self-worth and dignity that comes from giving. It takes a humble spirit for us to allow another to give to us and rest in that gift without impulsively giving in return.

Simply and graciously receive. My white middle-class environment did not teach the important spiritual posture of indebtedness. It was the Spirit of God through Jesus' washing the feet of the disciples that taught me this important lesson. This passage has changed for me over the years. Before, I always felt deeply Jesus' demand to wash people's feet, "For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you" (John 13:15). But I totally missed the exchange between Peter and Jesus earlier, "If I do not wash you, you have no part in me" (John 13:8). Oh, I read it; but I thought it gave me license to do my wholesale giving, the benevolent person that I was. After all, Jesus had done so much for me already by giving his life, shouldn't I do the same?

As I began to identify Jesus in the poor and powerless, the imprisoned and outcast (Matthew 25), I came to realize that not only do I need to serve, but I must let Jesus wash my feet through the lives of people God gives me. The very people I am called to are the very people who will serve me if I let them. "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash *one another's feet*" (John 13:14). To give and to take is a blessed exchange.

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My work seems so little in the grand scheme of things, but there is something profound for me in identifying with God's creation, of which I am a part, equal and of great value, and not being afraid of spiritual indebtedness to others, particularly to those whom I serve. I wonder what new lessons the Teacher has for me next.