

# Ronald Arms: Broken and Dirty

September 21, 1997

Seekers Church

Ronald Arms

## Broken and Dirty

[Mark 9:36](#)

So he sat down, called the Twelve to him and said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must make himself last of all and servant of all."

*A North American Christian writes, "A couple years ago, I spent a month in Asia, mostly with people who had servants. And I didn't like what I saw. It gave me a sense of what servant living would be like.*

*"I don't want to be a servant.*

*"Servants are people who drive you to restaurants and sit in the car while you eat.*

*"Servants are people who run in from the next room to get the salt for you because it's a foot out of your reach. They wash your dirty underwear by hand. Sometimes they sleep in a closet or on the floor in the hall.*

*"And they always carry the luggage...*

*"Jesus talked a lot about being a servant, but it's not a job I'd ever want."*

It's important that we not glorify this word servant because we happen to find it on the lips of Jesus in the Bible. It has ugly and difficult dimensions. My family had a maid for ten years. I can tell you that while these observations are accurate, being a servant is not simply a job. Certainly it is

that for many people, but it is often more than that too. Being a servant is being in relationship, usually an unequal relationship. As I've worked with this verse of Scripture, I hear Jesus saying status and position are not everything. What matters is relationships, even or perhaps especially, unequal ones.

Every relationship involves commitment. It defines the nature and quality of our relationships. This started out to be a sermon on the stewardship. But the more I worked with stewards and servants, the more the subject of commitment claimed my attention. So I want to use Jesus' command that we be last and servants of all as an opportunity to think more deeply about this subject.

When I look in the mirror of memory I see commitment as an act of will, something we do, an instrument of control. Servanthood, however, can transform these into windows of hope. It broadens the meaning of commitment to willingness, something we are, and an instrument of accountability. I want to explore how being a servant expands commitment from will to willingness, from doing to being, and from control to accountability. Perhaps in this way we can gain deeper insight into what Jesus meant when he said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must make himself last of all and servant of all."

## **From Will to Willingness**

*Call to Commitment* is the first book on the Church of the Savior. Commitment is a key concept in our tradition. However, the word does not appear in the Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible. In my etymological dictionary it comes from mission. To commit is to send. In Webster's we find it between commissure and committee, meaning a pledge to do something. Traditionally it is interpreted as a costly choice.

Commitment means hard work. It implies sacrifice. It comes from a sense of duty and is the glue that holds things

together. We hope somehow that the call to commitment explains the cost of discipleship. Inasmuch as these understandings have helped people move beyond cheap grace, and easy church membership they have played an important role in our history.

Jesus urges a relationship on us that is last and least. In so doing, He expands commitment from will to willingness. This invites us to listen to our inner voice. There we discover the integrity to stand in a state of surrender. Then we are more certain of our direction than our goal. Antonio Machado captures this beautifully in his poetic phrase, "Seeker, there is no path. You lay a path in walking."

I will profess no expertise in moving from will to willingness. I am often guarded, careful, withdrawn. I am reluctant to surrender to others. I can share some of my faults in public. Gradually I am learning to give up more of my secrets. But surrender does not come easily. Yet like servanthood it is universally available. Anyone can be last of all, servant of all. We simply need to surrender, to allow willingness rather than our will to guide our actions.

It is important we explore how one surrenders into commitment at Seekers. If the mirror of memory takes us back to the integrity of membership as a crucial step in our spiritual growth, perhaps the integrity of surrender can provide a window of hope. Perhaps a willingness to surrender our need to be right, to be in charge, to be sure is a broader understanding of commitment. Perhaps when we are willing to give up these needs we can begin to explore the integrity of surrender as this story does.

*"Jacob," said Jonah, washing the dishes after dinner, "I know that people think you are wise, but doesn't it bother you that other men think they are more important than you?"*

*"People who think they are more important than others have forgotten what is important," said Jacob. "I'm a man of faith. Faith holds power by letting go."*

*"So you don't mind bending to what others want you to do?" asked the boy.*

*"To bend is not to bow," answered Jacob.*

*"But being strong is what it means to be a man." Jonah's voice stressed the word man.*

*"Every man has strengths," said Jacob. "And every strength is its own weakness."*

## **From A Commitment of Doing to A Commitment of Being**

Some have described the integrity of surrender as a commitment of being rather than a commitment of doing. Traditionally we think of commitment in terms of activity. On the third Sunday in October we publicly promise to practice personal and community disciplines. These involve doing certain things every day. They include the choice to participate in a mission group on a weekly basis. They ask us to give proportionally of our incomes. They challenge us to affirm the community's call and make it our own. In a wide variety of ways commitment activates us. It helps us do what otherwise would be difficult at best.

A commitment of being expands and deepens this commitment of doing by making it authentic.

*A customer went to a gallery wanting to purchase a picture. The artist, however, had a "not for sale" sign posted on it. The customer asked if he could make him a copy then. On the agreed day he returned to find a replica sitting in the studio. In all its details it copied the original. Even the signature of the artist on it was the same. Once again the customer bargained for the original and once again the artist refused. The customer said, "Look, these two paintings share the same setting, scenery, colors, composition, brush strokes... They look alike as two drops of water. What is the difference? Why will you not grant my simple wish?" The*

*artist explained, "This painting that I am fond of is original. The painting you commissioned is an imitation. That is the difference."*

In reflecting on the experience the customer noted, "In painting, ... (the) canvas, easel, paint, brushes, and so forth – are necessary for the artist to enter into the art; but when the painting begins, the artist must ignore both materials and technique...Only then is the painting original.

"... Because of the very process of fabricating it, the imitation must lack spirituality. The hands and the head are not enough to create anything unique if the heart is missing, for that which we call heart is the attribute of the spirit, the essential element of the true artist."

A commitment of being gives relationships the heart that makes them authentic. It turns disciplines into personal practices. It transforms imitation into meaningful repetition. Different faiths make a similar point. Christians express it this way, "I do not seek to follow in the footsteps of the men of old; I seek what they sought." Buddhists say, "I do not wish to dye my clothes saffron, the color of a holy order; I want to dye my heart with divine love." A Jewish story about Zuzya reads, "When I get to heaven, they will not ask me why I was not Moses, but why I was not Zuzya." Each of these statements understands that if the means are only imitations, then the ends are merely replicas. A commitment that moves from doing to being knows each one of us must find our own way, at our own speed, in our own place. The call to commitment is a call to be originals, not imitations.

## **From Control to Accountability**

Lest we mistake the call to authenticity for a "do your own thing spirituality," our understanding of commitment needs to include the invitation to the magnificent coalition of

unalikes. Jesus challenges us to collectively shape our future. Ours is not a solo performance. Increasingly the evidence suggests we are inter-related in ways we are just beginning to understand. So while our originality is valuable, it must lead us to explore the dimensions of commitment we share in common.

Traditionally commitment is a control mechanism. It is to put someone in a place that keeps him or her safe. It is to deliver a person into the charge of another. We commit someone to a mental institution. Thus it is no surprise that Seekers gives control of key decisions to those who make a commitment to it. Clearly the mirror of memory links commitment and control.

But servants are seldom in control. When Jesus commands us to be servants, He throws open the windows of hope. This emphasis on service saves us from a set of rules that limits God to the righteous, the holy and the privileged. Jesus understands the Sacred is more often found in awe than in answers. He knows God often appears in the cracks and surprises of life. So He opens wide the doors of access to Spirit. Neither Jew nor Gentile, neither male nor female, neither slave nor free is excluded. What God calls pure is good enough. This boundary breaking inclusivity opens the windows of hope for the least of us.

When we look back at the life of Jesus, his insistence on inclusion demands our attention. He makes us beneficiaries of a compassion that refuses to exclude others. He sees the best in people without denying their worst. He liberates and enlarges others. Jesus honors the personal dignity and worth of all, and evokes their own innate creative power for leadership.

If stewardship is accountability without control, then commitment is sharing control with others so that we can become mutually accountable. Some find accountability without

control difficult, but insisting on accountability before sharing control is equally complicated. The call to be last and servant of all moves us beyond issues of control, to matters of accountability. It is not who is in charge that matters rather it is how much we share with and listen to each other. These enrich the quality of our relationships. They encourage service.

For me this happened when Seekers gave me a thousand dollars and asked me to put it to good use in El Salvador. Over time I accounted for more than ten thousand dollars of our international giving, and relationships developed which led to a trip there that touched the lives of people in both countries. Seekers relinquished control of some of its money, so that others and I could be accountable for its use.

Accountability without control is possible. A commitment that shares control with others so that mutual accountability increases is too. These clearly deepen and expand what had been an instrument of control into an exchange of power among people who hold on by letting go.

## **Conclusion**

So what does a commitment that moves from will to willingness, from doing to being, from control to accountability produce? Broken and dirties. What does a call to be servants result in? Broken and dirties.

*When Sam Keen was a college freshman, every afternoon he went to the bakery for refreshment and to ogle the succulent young waitress. His budget allowed for only a single oatmeal cookie, a cup of coffee, and a small tip. One day, noticing that he seemed to be lusting after more than he could afford, the waitress of delights and wisdom informed him, "Did you know that for a quarter, instead of buying one whole oatmeal cookie, you could get a bag of brokens and dirties?" "What are brokens and dirties?" he asked. "I'll show you," she*

*said, disappearing into the kitchen and reappearing with a brown bag. Reaching in she took a fragment of a cookie and handed him another. "These are the cookies that came out of the oven in weird shapes or got broken when we took them off the pan."*

Committed servants are those who discover that a shared bag of broken and dirties satisfies our appetite much better than a single perfect cookie. To be servants we need to be broken. This is the integrity of surrender. It moves beyond the cost of discipleship to a place where we find a willingness to be last and least of all. As cookies come off the tray in odd and unique shapes, so we too must be authentic in this. It is not a matter of imitation. Ours is not a cookie cutter faith. Instead we will need to get dirty, make mistakes, give up control and give account of ourselves. Our hope is not that we can be perfect. Our hope is that in God's kingdom there is room for broken and dirties. Commitment may not be a cookie but it calls the magnificent coalition of unalikes together. Welcome!