

Diakonia according to the Gospel of John*

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In what follows I refer to *diakonia* as the social ministry of church, in line with the definition given in the Church of Norway's *Plan for diakonia*. This plan defines diakonia as "the caring ministry of the church. It is the gospel in action and is expressed through loving your neighbour, creating inclusive communities, caring for creation and struggling for justice."¹

This concept of diakonia developed in the course of church history, and it has been strongly impacted by the diaconal movement initiated in Germany in the 1830s with its focus on providing health and social services. Seeking to ground such practice theologically, biblical material was addressed, especially passages that contain the so-called *diak*-words (διακονειν, διακονια and διακονος), which often are translated as *serve*, *service* and *servant*, respectively. Interpreters, especially those within the diaconal movement, have read these words meaning "active Christian love of the neighbor" (Kittel 1935). Recent research, however, showed that this does not correspond to the understanding in classic Greek, where diakonia means an important mission given to a person; a *diakonos* is authorized to perform the role of being a messenger or go-between (Collins 1990; Hentschel 2007).

Mark10:45 often appears as a key biblical reference in this regard. Here Jesus states that "the Son of Man came not to be served (διακονηθηγαι) but to serve (διακονησαι), and to give his life a ransom for many." In the tradition of the diaconal movement, this and similar sayings of Jesus are interpreted as affirmations of his caring ministry for the suffering and the marginalized, in line with the message sent to John the Baptist, who from prison had asked Jesus whether he was the one who is to come: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them" (Matt 11:4-5). All three synoptic gospels, and in particular Luke, present a series of narratives where the caring and healing ministry of Jesus is portrayed, as summarized in Matthew: "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogue and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people" (Matt 4:23).

* This article is based on my farewell lecture as professor at Diakonhjemmet University College in October 2012, and has been slightly revised.

1 An English translation of the plan is available at <https://www.kirken.no/?event=doLink&famID=247>

The Gospel of John is different, in many ways, and this may be the reason why relatively few references are made to this gospel in the diaconal literature. It does not present Jesus as a servant using the *diak*-words, instead most readers will perceive Jesus as a preacher, coming from above and exalted over the people around him. In the view of many interpreters John promotes a high Christology, the pre-existent Christ, incarnated in the world, in contrast to the low Christology of the synoptic gospels, especially in Mark.²

In John there is no mention of the kingdom of God, nor do we find parables that announce its saving power and presence among poor and suffering people. Focus rather is given to themes that seem to be rooted in the religious and philosophical vernacular of the contemporary Hellenistic environment and its preference of dualistic terms: darkness–light, lie–truth, ignorance–knowledge and hate–love. Apparently this indicates less interest in the diaconal ministry of Jesus. In fact, the healing narratives in John are quite few, only three compared with close to thirty in the synoptic gospels, with the addition of the story of Lazarus who was raised to life.

There is however one passage in the Gospel of John that quite often is referred to within the diaconal movement, namely, the story in Chapter 13 when Jesus washed the disciples' feet. It may be asked why this narrative has become so important among readers engaged in diaconal work since it does not use any of the *diak*-words, nor is there any reference to sick or needy people, those normally targeted by charitable diakonia. The reason is of course the interpretation of the foot washing as an example of humble service that the disciples are called to imitate. This corresponds to the spiritual tradition that since the 1830s motivated deaconesses and deacons for their ministry, of being ready to do the kind of service that most people would consider lowly and humiliating, for instance, attending to sick and helpless people. And they would affirm that, in order to be prepared for such service, they need first to be attended by Jesus, the Deacon sent by the Father, and have their feet washed by him.

There are, however, good reasons to ask whether this interpretation corresponds to what John had in mind when telling this story. The first observation to be made is that the washing of feet did not take place when the guests arrived, which was the normal procedure, when a slave could be given the task of doing this. It happens during the meal, and John introduces the story by stating that "Jesus knew that his hour had come," and that he had "loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end" (13:1). So this is the moment of announcing final truth and everlasting relationship, not of introducing pious practices. When Peter resisted the idea of having his feet

2 Rudolf Bultmann influenced the interpretation of the Gospel John throughout the 20th century, claiming that it was strongly marked by Gnostic and Hellenistic religiosity (Kümmel 1979: 45–51).

washed by his Lord, the rabbi or master whom he had committed himself to follow, he is told that he does not know what Jesus is doing. “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me,” Jesus says (13:8). So the issue is not humility and service as virtue and ethical behavior, but knowledge and sharing, manifesting the condition of belonging to and being a part of the newness of life that Jesus brought about.

In the Christian tradition this story has been linked to the act of baptism, as a rite of initiation (Cullmann 1962: 100–104). It is clear it has this cultic, we could say sacramental, dimension. But its message goes further and envisages the newness of life as commitment to a lifestyle of mutual love and care among the disciples. As Jesus asks when they are back at the table: “Do you know what I have done to you?” (13:12). Then he adds: “I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you” (13:15).

The word “example” deserves further attention. The Greek word used here (*υποδειγμα*) is associated in contemporary Jewish texts with exemplary death, which indicates that what here is meant is much more than an ethical example: It is an act of divine salvific intervention (Moloney 1998: 376). The disciples are exhorted to imitate that example, not depending on their own strength and will, as this easily could be misunderstood to mean, but to remain within the example, as a new reality, and its power, so that they can be empowered for relationships of mutual love: “By this everybody will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (13:35).

It can of course be claimed that the example of Jesus and the exhortation on love has relevance for diaconal action. But it should be noted that the focus here is the group of disciples and the mutual love among them – not the kind of charitable care for people in need that diaconal action according to our tradition is understood to be. Another possible link to what we call diaconal practice could be the statement of Jesus that “servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them” (13:16). But the Greek word for servant here is not *διακονος*, as might be expected, but *δουλος*, which means slave, a term with quite different connotations. It seems also that Jesus here is making a general comment, more or less in the form of a proverb, to announce a new reality of egalitarian relationships, turning the social order of the day upside down. This may be read as a warning against tendencies of hierarchical leadership structures that were developing in the church at the time when this gospel was written and which was not supported by the community of John (Brown 1979: 86–88).

In my opinion it is not the story about the washing of the disciples’ feet that opens for an understanding of the theology of diakonia in John. In my recently published book (Nordstokke 2013), I opted for another approach when looking for diaconal motifs and messages, namely, the sequence of seven narratives that John present as signs (*σημειον*). I read them as diaconal

signs, both in the sense that they let us see the diaconal ministry of Jesus and at the same time as signs for our diaconal practice today.

The Gospel of John is structured in two main parts. The first encompasses chapters 2–11; the seven signs are all placed within this part. In the second part, chapters 13–20, Jesus is presented as *the* sign “lifted up from the earth” drawing all people to him (12:23). In addition there is a prologue, where Jesus is presented as the pre-existent *Logos* (the Word), who became flesh and who gave his believers power (ἐξουσία) to become children of God (1:12). Chapter 12 serves as a transition between the two parts. The final chapter 21 was added later as a kind of epilogue clarifying some questions that the first readers may have had regarding the author of the gospel and his fate. The structure of the fourth gospel, the Gospel John, thus differs substantially from the other three. The author has evidently had his own reasons for presenting the Jesus story the way he did.

It has been suggested that a collection of sign narratives already existed, perhaps in a written form, and that John incorporated it in his gospel (Michaelis 1961: 110–111). These are the sign narratives:

1. The wedding at Cana (2:1–12);
2. Jesus heals an official’s son (4:46–54);
3. Jesus heals the sick at Bethesda (5:1–18);
4. Feeding the five thousand (6:1–15);
5. Jesus walks on the water (6:16–21);
6. A man born blind receives sight (9:1–41);
7. Jesus raises Lazarus to life (11:1–44).

John is well aware of the fact that Jesus did many more signs, and he concludes his gospel saying that “these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name” (20:31). Here we already get one important key when asking for the significance of the signs: They connect faith and life – *faith* in Jesus, the one who did the signs, and *life* reflecting their everyday experience of vulnerability and suffering.

This is why, in my view, the narratives of the signs can be read in a diaconal perspective. Each of them takes place in the midst of human reality, they present stories of marginalized people, and how forces of death threaten their life. In such contexts Jesus appears as the defender of human dignity and life, sent by his heavenly Father. Newness of life is experienced, as enough wine when the wedding party is about to become a failure, as food for hungry people in the desert, as healing of a person that has been sick for 38 years, and as return to life of a beloved brother who has passed away – in other words, in situations that ordinary people experience, especially those at the margin of society.

This is where and how the Incarnate is met and revealed as God's Messiah, according to the Gospel of John. It implies a clear social perspective – at the margin of society, both in social and religious terms.³ It presents Jesus as sensitive to human needs and ready to intervene. Situations of suffering are transformed so that people get their lives back. The signs therefore announce that the forces of life that Jesus represents are stronger than the forces of death that had surrounded these persons.

The readers of the Gospel of John are exhorted to have faith and believe that the signs also have meaning in their situation whenever they experience the threatening forces of death. They are included in the newness of life that Jesus announced: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (10:10). Most of the first readers of the gospel were probably Jews who had been "driven out" of the synagogue (9:34), i. e., people who had lost their religious affiliation. As Jews they had remembered Moses "for all the signs and wonders that the Lord sent him to perform in the land of Egypt" (Deut 34:11). Now Jesus is their new Moses, with the difference that Jesus and the signs that he performed surpass those of Moses (Glasson 1963). As John states: "The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (1:17).

Upon reading the narratives of the signs in this perspective, I identified seven themes that in my view both give meaning as headings of these stories and at the same time serve as keys to interpreting them in today's context, with special reference to diaconal challenges and practices. They are:

1. *Shame* – The wedding at Cana (2:1–12);
2. *Vulnerability* – Jesus heals an official's son (4:46–54);
3. *Exclusion* – Jesus heals the sick at Bethesda (5:1–18);
4. *Hunger* – Feeding the five thousand (6:1–15);
5. *Fear* – Jesus walks on the water (6:16–21);
6. *Guilt* – A man born blind receives sight (9:1–41);
7. *Death* – Jesus raises Lazarus to life (11:1–44).

I am aware that these themes to a certain degree reflect what I read into the text, and that this is conditioned by the diaconal perspective I have opted for.⁴ I therefore clearly admit that this is only one way of interpreting them.

3 In my reading of the Gospel in John, I have found much support in the social-scientific studies of the New Testament, among them Bruce J. Malina and Ricard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998, and Robert J. Karris, *Jesus and the Marginalized in John's Gospel*, Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1990. I have also drawn insight from John J. Pilch, *Healing in the New Testament. Insights from Medical and Mediterranean Anthropology*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000.

4 Rather than *exegesis*, this way of reading the biblical text may be described as *eisegesis* in line with hermeneutical program of José Severino Croatto and his understanding of the reading as "production of meaning" (Croatto 1987). It also corresponds to "contextual interpreta-

But I am convinced that my reading is not totally arbitrary, as I perceive John's selection of signs as a range (or a fan) of threats, on the one hand indicating completeness, the number seven has that symbolic meaning, on the other hand growing in intensity and therefore logically ending up with the final and inevitable threat: death.

Let us have a closer look at these narratives and how they can be read in a diaconal perspective:

The first (2:1–12) is a story about a wedding party, where it is reported that they soon will run out of wine. Traditionally it was the task of the friends of the bridegroom to bring the wine to the party. Are the number of friends limited, or were they too poor to ensure the quantity needed? The problem is brought to the bridegroom, which makes us assume that the parents, who normally would be responsible, were not there. Perhaps were they dead, which was not unlikely taking into consideration the average life expectancy of that time.

For poor people a wedding party is a demanding project, and it seems that this couple had underestimated the costs. No parents were there to advise them. This day, intended to be a public celebration of their happiness, threatened to end in disgrace and shame. As long as this couple lived this misfortune would follow them, in the form of merciless gossip or jokes, without their being able to defend themselves.

This is what is at stake when Jesus acts. In a miraculous way water is turned into wine, without anybody asking what had happened, and with the result that the steward praises the bridegroom for keeping the good wine until the latter part of the party. The treat of shame is transformed into honor – honor that would accompany the couple for the rest of their life.

For the readers this story is presented as a sign that the followers of Jesus shall not be ashamed, although they are mocked, both because of their faith and their social status. Jesus fulfils the promise in Psalms 34:5: "Look to him, and be radiant; so your faces shall never be ashamed". In a diaconal perspective this narrative raises the issue of shame, of how people today find themselves in situations of shame, and how diaconal actors can address such situations, defending human dignity and honor.

The second sign (4:46–54) refers to the healing of an official's son. John does not say whether this man is a Jew or a foreigner; a similar story told in Matthew and Luke indicates that he is a Roman officer, and as such a powerful person. Unlike most of the others presented in the sign narratives, he cannot be considered marginalized. His son's illness, however, has revealed his vulnerability. With all his power he had to admit that "he was at the point of death," and there was nothing he could do. His vulnerability is exposed in

tion" as developed by Gerald West in South Africa, who points out the importance of also reading behind and in front of the text (West 1993).

the fact that he starts walking in direction of Cana, some 30 kilometers from Capernaum where he was residing, in search of Jesus. What were chances of finding him, of being attended and of convincing Jesus to come with him, and eventually of his son being healed? Would not people who already despised him for serving the unpopular ruler Herod comment that he deserved what had happened to him and his family, and ridicule him for seeking help from a traditional healer like Jesus?

This narrative points at vulnerability as a basic human condition that Jesus acknowledges and responds to. In a diaconal perspective vulnerability should not only be considered in negative categories, but rather as an opportunity for building relationships of mutual attention and care. Jesus recognizes the faith of the vulnerable; he encourages him to go home where he will find his son alive. For the readers this is a sign that even a pagan mercenary is included in the healing ministry of Jesus, which he moreover portrayed as an example of faith. For diaconal actors this is a reminder not to show partiality and be prejudiced when meeting people in need.

The third sign (5:1–18) takes place in Jerusalem where a man that had been ill for 38 years is lying close to the pool called Bethesda. His suffering is not only physical, but also social, as he himself states: He has nobody to bring him into the healing water. Read from a diaconal perspective: this is the experience of being excluded, in all meanings of that word.

The story portrays the Incarnate as present, sensing the man's suffering, and then as asking: "Do you want to be made well?" From a diaconal perspective this may be read as a sign of participatory practice in situations of exclusion, and of empowering the excluded to assume responsibility for being healed.

The act of healing is described with a minimum of words; John shows no interest in details or in the therapeutic techniques used by Jesus. He just states what Jesus said: "Stand up, take your mat and walk!" and that the man at once was made well: He took up his mat and began to walk. The point is not secret magic knowledge, but the healing power of Jesus' word. In John's understanding: This Word is still among us, for that reason what happened then continues to be a sign even today.

This happened on a Sabbath, which provoked negative reactions among the religious establishment, since working was forbidden on that day. In a diaconal perspective this may be read as a reminder that actions that envisage healing and inclusion may provoke the social and religious order, even today.

The fourth sign is about the feeding of the five thousand (6:1–15). From a diaconal perspective it is about hunger, a basic human need that, according to Jesus, must be an unquestionable area of concern for his followers. He merely asks: "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" (6:5). There

is no discussion of whose responsibility is it that so many are without food, which of course is an important topic. Action is needed *now*.

The story also presents other elements that are relevant for a diaconal reflection: The boy with five barley loaves and two fish brings in the resources that evidently are very limited, but when being blessed and shared, they are multiplied and turn out to be more than enough for all to be satisfied. This may be read as a story about two different kinds of mindset, both known from diaconal practice: one represented by Andrew who brought the little boy to Jesus, another by Philip who calculated that two hundred denarii would not be enough, should they happen to be available. Or, expressed in modern language, the difference between an asset-based and a needs-based approach, where the first sees resources and possibilities and the latter concentrates on what is lacking.

A final observation related to this narrative as told in John: The multitude is not fed after a long day of preaching. There certainly were expectations, John notes that the crowd kept following Jesus because of the signs that he was doing for the sick (6:2). The action of Jesus, however, is unconditional: It is not a reward for having listened to his sermons. Instead, John makes a brief and apparently abrupt reference to Passover, the festival of the Jews, stating that it was near. That is the sign: Much as Moses liberated and led those who had been kept in captivity, and provided food for them when they passed through the desert, Jesus as the new Moses takes care of those to whom he has been sent.

This perspective is kept in the next, the fifth, sign and story of Jesus walking on the water (6:16–21). It brings to memory how Moses made the people of Israel cross the Red Sea rescuing them from the powers of the water. The scene is now the Sea of Galilee, and the disciples are rowing back to Capernaum, not knowing where Jesus had gone. He had just vanished when the crowd wanted to make him king. That is how they had interpreted the sign of caring for the hungry.

As they were rowing, it became dark and windy, as if all demonic powers of nature were out to destroy them. Then suddenly they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. John does not comment on this – why should they be terrified? He just notes that fear was added to fear, and then the words of Jesus: “It is I, do not be afraid!” (6:20).

A diaconal reading of this sign therefore allows for fear as theme, especially in times like ours when the untamable forces of nature again and again claim many human lives, and climate change is endangering the lives of many more, especially in the poorest parts of the world. How can we read the words “It is I, do not be afraid” in today’s reality? How can faith and diaconal initiatives meet fear in a way that transforms, reconciles and empowers for faith and responsible action?

The sixth sign refers to the story about the man born blind (9:1–41). The core theme here is guilt, and it is introduced by the disciples who ask Jesus: “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” The attitude of the disciples is not very diaconal: They reduce the man to an object of theological discussion; he himself is not even given the chance to give his opinion. That may have caused the immediate answer of Jesus: “Neither this man nor his parents sinned!” (9:3).

These words by Jesus are surprisingly categorical by taking into account the general conviction at that time that sin was the reason behind sickness and suffering, a position that seem to have been given religious sanction. Did not the Law declare that God would punish the children and even the grand grandchildren of a person who sinned against the Second Commandment? (Ex 20:5). According to the contemporary Jewish teaching a pregnant woman could harm her baby if she did not observe this commandment (Malina and Rohrbaugh 1998: 169–170). So someone must have committed a sin!

Added to this comes the scaring fact of blindness. In the time of Jesus being blind was considered a very serious defect that indicated that the powers of sin were dominating this person. The eyes were regarded as a sort of lamps, as Jesus himself says in Matthew 6:22. The blind lacked those sources of light; instead they were locked up in their own darkness. Or even worse: They might possess an evil eye that would serve the cause of darkness harming other people (Matthew 6:33).

According to this understanding blindness as darkness is more than a physical condition, it has profound spiritual and even metaphysical implications (Pilch 2000: 131–138). Blind people therefore were not only pitied, they were feared. Sinfulness is not only a problem in relation to God, but also in relation to others. Such reasoning made it evident that this category of persons must be isolated and excluded – stigmatization became a logical social practice in order to protect us from what might destroy us.

Jesus not only rejects this understanding, he announces an alternative way of seeing this man: “This happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him. As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me” (9:3b-4a). This saying may be read as a diaconal program:

First, there is a focus on *doing*. When meeting a suffering person the followers of Jesus are challenged to care about him or her, and not to get lost in theological puzzles like the disciples seem to have. Second, Jesus links such doing to *God!* Diaconal work is not in the first place activism, projects and initiatives that are invented in response to contextual and situational challenges. In the perspective of Jesus such doings are the works of the one who sent him, in other words: God is manifested as Creator, Savior and Giver of Life. Third and perhaps most decisive, Jesus offers a different logic for understanding the situation of the blind man. The real issue is not what has caused his suffering, looking backwards, considering his fate today as a hopeless

endpoint. Instead Jesus sees his present situation as a starting point – looking forward in direction of what God’s work can bring: newness of life. Today is the day of grace, of transformation and empowerment.

Jesus sends him to the Pool of Siloam to wash himself – a place known for its healing water. What happens next is told by four words: (He) went, washed (himself), returned (home), (was) seeing. No extra words, no explanation – just stating what happened. The naked fact *is* the sign. Those four verbs clearly state the healing as a good work, carrying its importance and meaningfulness in itself, not depending on interpretations or consequences. Here is no reference to faith as condition or claim. In the same way diaconal action is meaningful in itself, whenever a hungry person is fed, a prisoner remembered and visited, injustice restored, violence stopped, reconciliation brought about. At the same time such action is seen as a sign that points beyond what happened there and then, in a way that promises healing, justice and peace to all who witness this specific sign.

But the story does not end here. One of the interesting traits of this passage is the contrast between the very brief description of the healing, and the long narrative of what happened afterwards. The healing caused confusion, first in the neighborhood, and then in relation to the religious authorities.

The first observation is that the works of God are resisted. In the words of John: Those who should be expected to see them are blind to them. Such blindness is much more serious than the kind of blindness of the man who was healed.

Second, healing is not necessarily an easy way out of problems. To some the dismantling of labels, prejudices and stigmatization becomes most threatening. Instead of rejoicing, people ask questions: Is this the same man we know? Who is responsible for this? Does he not know that today is the Sabbath?

This is when, according to John, a second miracle happens: The former silent and helpless man is empowered to stand up and tell his story with firmness. He affirms his identity, he testifies to what has happened to him and to Jesus as the one who has opened his eyes.

And last and seventh sign relates to the narrative about Lazarus, who was raised from the dead (11:1–44). Death is the last and most cruel enemy, and it logical that this story both functions as a climax in the series of signs as well as as a transition to what now follows: the story about Jesus as final sign through his death and resurrection.

Compared to the other narratives, which are mostly quite short, this one is long and brings the readers through many stages, presenting situations of tension: Why did Jesus wait when he knew that his friend was sick? Both Martha and Maria confront him with this question, and they must have felt that they were not being answered in a way that made sense to them. Then there is a dialogue about resurrection where the sisters seem to give the cor-

rect answers, although Jesus gets very upset. This is when Jesus goes to the tomb and gives order to take away the stone that closes it. Martha tries to warn him, explaining that the dead body is already decomposing.

What happens is the ultimate sign of the incarnational presence of Jesus in human hopelessness. As Lazarus is called out of the tomb, faith sees Jesus as the Resurrection and the Life, victorious wherever the forces of death seem to be reigning.

Diaconal service of solidarity and care operates within this space of suffering, loss and grief, of wrestling with existential questions, and of proclaiming Christ's victory over death. As a sign it does not deny the reality of death, but it encourages the followers of Jesus to mitigate its bitterness and in action bear witness of faith, hope and love.

In summary, we have observed that through the sign narratives John presents the Incarnate as present among suffering and marginalized persons, transforming their situation in direction of life and faith. As signs they announce to the readers of the gospel that Christ continues to be present also today, with the same promise of life. The signs are there to orient the followers of Jesus in three directions: First, in acknowledging the forces of death in their own reality, they recognize the experiences of the persons told about in the sign narratives. Second, in recognizing Jesus and his healing and saving power as present in the midst of this reality, as source for faith and life. And third, interpreting them as a vocation to follow Jesus and his liberating power that transforms, reconciles and empowers. According to John, to follow Jesus implies being a servant (*diakonos*).

As already stated above, the *diak*-words are not used in the Gospel of John as in the synoptic gospels. As a matter of fact, the term *diakonia* is not used at all; the other two *diak*-words are found 5 times in John, but never related directly to Jesus:

1. In 2:5 *diakonos* refers to the servants at the wedding in Cana: "His mother said to the servants (τοὺς διακονοὺς), 'Do whatever he tells you.'"
2. In 12:2 the verb refers to Martha who served (διηκονεῖ) at the dinner they gave for him, with Lazarus at the table with him (12:2). This was the occasion when Maria anointed Jesus.
3. In 12:26 the *diak*-words refer to his followers, three times in the same verse (12:26), stating that "whoever serves (διακονῆ) me must follow me; and where I am (οπου εμι εγω), there will my servant (ο διακονος ο εμος) be also. Whoever serves me (εμοι διακονη), the Father will honor."

Here *diakonia* is portrayed as the relationship between a master and his disciples, as the ministry of following Jesus. At first this may sound as if John is disconnecting the concept of *diakonia* from a concern for the suffering and the poor, opting for a more spiritual way of conceptualizing this term, as a kind of individual piety. I am convinced that this is not what John has

in mind. To follow Jesus means to follow the signs of his incarnational presence and ministry at the margin of society, where the forces of death are experienced. That is where his disciples are sent to perform signs of healing, transformation, inclusion and empowerment.

This mission was affirmed when Jesus met his disciples after his resurrection: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (20:21). The word “as” (Greek: *καθως*) should be understood as “in the same manner.” That is how his disciples are to follow his example, as expressed in the narrative of foot washing: They are mandated to go to the same places that he did, being incarnated in true human reality, and to perform under his authority the same kind of – we would say: diaconal – works that he had done.

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