

Servant Leadership

Mark 10:35-45

James and John, the sons of Zebedee,
came forward to Jesus and said to him,
“Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.”

And Jesus said to them,
“What is it you want me to do for you?”

And they said to him,
“Grant us to sit, one at your right hand
and one at your left, in your glory.”

But Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking.
Are you able to drink the cup that I drink,
or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?”

They replied, “We are able.”

Then Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink you will drink;
and with the baptism with which I am baptized,
you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand
or at my left is not mine to grant,
but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.”

When the ten heard this,
they began to be angry with James and John.

So Jesus called them and said to them,
“You know that among the Gentiles
those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them,
and their great ones are tyrants over them.

But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes
to become great among you must be your servant,
and whoever wishes to be first among you must be servant of all.

For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve,
and to give his life a ransom for many.”

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I.

I would like to speak to you today about the notion of service or servanthood. However, I don't want us to do so in terms of serving tea, serving a prison sentence, serving a tennis ball, having another serving of ice cream (*I don't mind if I do*) serving in the army, serving the public or even serving the greater good. To a large degree, we all understand what it means to serve in such capacities. Instead, what I'd like to focus on today, primarily because this morning's scripture reading is so illustrative of the concept, is the notion of Servant *Leadership*.

II.

Although certainly not a new concept by any means, the actual term "Servant Leadership" was first coined in 1970 by author Robert K. Greenleaf in his essay, "The Servant As Leader." Essentially, what Greenleaf said is that there are two extremes of leadership. On one end of the spectrum there is the person who begins with a natural feeling that one *wants* or even *needs* to *serve*; this is their first thought, their gut instinct, their basic orientation. Though not necessarily *always* the case, or even *often* the case, when a person does come to a conscious awareness of such an orientation within themselves, they are spurred on by both internal motivation and external necessity to develop within themselves the skills necessary for leadership. These people are, first and foremost, servants by nature; and, second, leaders out of necessity.

III.

On the other end of the spectrum is the person one might refer to as a "Born Leader" but has no inkling of how or where they want to lead. Or, the person who knows exactly how and where he or she wants to lead, either out of ambition or glory but, when the wheel hits the road, they do not necessarily possess the skills or fortitude to actually *be* the kind of leader to which they aspire, or that *others* necessarily need.

In both instances, the one who is gifted but directionless, and the one who is driven but ineffective, service is either an after-thought or a means to an end; not necessarily a natural proclivity. And yet, because there are so few arenas in which one can *be* a leader, or because those arenas necessarily require certain *other* skills and abilities, like athletic prowess or intellectual acumen, most people who are born to lead or who desperately seek to lead, find themselves leading by serving because it is the only option open to them.

IV.

In short, then, Greenleaf posits two extremes: servants who lead versus leaders who serve; though, certainly between them, there are countless hues which are part of the infinite variety of human nature. Today's scripture reading, Mark 10:25-35, offers us a crisp demonstration of these two orientations; with Jesus at one extreme and the sons of Zebedee at the other.

Our sermon text follows right on the heels, of Jesus foretelling, not once, but thrice, of his imminent death and resurrection. However, none of the Disciples, and certainly not James and John, even come close to fathoming the possibility that the story would unfold, or conclude, in such a way. In all fairness, how could they? It is like being asked a multiple choice question where the correct answer isn't even an option.

V.

For the Disciples, the answer to the future on which they were focusing was the only one they had ever been taught to imagine or for which to hope: that of an eschatological Lord who goes to Jerusalem to restore the glory of the fallen throne of David. That such a Savior and King, the one to which they had all hitched their wagons, would meet with the cruelty and pain of the cross was simply unimaginable to them. The disciples had seen Jesus, literally, perform miracles and possess power no human had ever manifested. So convinced were they of a new geo-political reality that it seemed, especially to James and John, that it was now time to start planning and maneuvering for their soon to be appointed leadership roles in the new order of things. Therefore, James and John say to Jesus, "*Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.*"

VI.

I think that for Jesus, this must have been similar to that moment which all parents have experienced when, say, in the grocery store your kids are behaving so badly you just leave your cart full of food and simply walk out the door and punt for dinner; rummaging through the far reaches of the freezer for any old thing to put on the table that night. Quite simply, you are not going to put up with it any longer. The time has arrived to seize the teachable moment and make the point; so the lesson begins. First out the chute, is Jesus' fair warning that they have *no* idea about the true nature of what they are asking. That the cup from which he is about to drink, and the baptism he is about to undergo is not something in which they want to share; at *all*.

VII.

James and John had no way of knowing that in requesting to participate in Jesus' *glory* they were also asking to share in his destiny of *pain* and *suffering*; which was an indispensable and non-negotiable condition of that glorification. For the cup in which they were seeking to share, is nothing less than the divine punishment being administered to the world for its sin. Here in this passage, then, Jesus is laying down the cornerstone of our theology and of our faith: that he would freely become not a *leader* who would serve, but a *servant* who would lead by acting as a substitute for us in bearing the punishment for our transgressions so that we might overcome our alienation from God, our bondage to sin, and our subjugation to death. "*Oh, yeah.*" "*No problem.*" "*We got this.*" "*We are able,*" say James and John.

VIII.

So confident are James and John of the completeness of their comprehension, so certain are they of the depth and breathe of their abilities, so hungry are they for their own power and glory, that they never pick up on the bitter truth of Jesus' words, "*The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized.*" We know, at least in part, how prophetic these words were, as we read in Acts ch. 12 that James was killed by the sword, executed by King Herod.

As for John's fate, we do not know with certitude. After at least one arrest and some degree of persecution, the last we hear of John is in Acts ch. 8 when he goes down to Samaria to check out the work Phillip was doing. There is

reason to believe, however, because there is no further mention of him, that John was also martyred. Perhaps, even, at the hands of Paul prior to his conversion, as Acts 22 reports him saying “*I persecuted the followers of the Way to their death.*”

IX.

While all of this was transpiring between Jesus, James, and John, the rest of the Disciples caught wind of what the sons of Zebedee were up to; and they were none too happy about it. So Jesus, seeing that he now has a whole pack of screaming toddlers in the produce aisle, decides to take them out behind the woodshed of servanthood. Look, Jesus says, leadership isn't about lording over others. It is not about gloating, bragging, scheming, back-stabbing, social-climbing, power-grabbing, political maneuvering or “puffing up” oneself (a phrase the Apostle Paul would later use). We are going to do this in an entirely *different* way. You are being called to lead not as tyrants, but as *servants*. Then Jesus goes on to redefine greatness and status: “*Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be servant of all.*”

X.

This new methodology for leadership absolutely came as a stunning shock to the Disciples, especially James and John. Remember, church folk like us have heard the mantra of servanthood most of our lives. However, this was a *completely* new and *unintuitive* idea for the disciples; and, I'm sure, something they found quite nonsensical if not embarrassing.

Then, just as they were attempting to wrap their minds around what Jesus was saying, and how this was going to make them look to the rest of the world, Jesus moves from the silly to the scandalous and says, “For the Son of Man came not to *be* served but to *serve*, and to give *his* life a ransom for *many*.” That on the cross the “Son of man,” the Christological title Jesus claims for himself, would take the place of the many, the elect community, the eschatological people of God, at once atoning for our sin and reconnecting us with our Creator.

XI.

I think it is difficult for us to imagine just how *unimaginable* of an idea this was to the disciples. It is also, albeit in something of a different way, fairly unimaginable to us as well. I think we can all agree, at least in broad strokes, about the purpose and relevance of the cross. I also think we can all agree, about the value and importance of serving others. In fact, if you are sitting here this morning, in pew or on sofa, I would say you *excel* at servanthood. Not only do you talk the talk about your faith in the cross, you also walk the walk by putting that faith into action on behalf others. You recognize within yourself your own natural proclivity to serve others, and your first thought, your base instinct is to ask, “How can I help?” Quite simply, and quite thankfully, this is what makes us the church.

XII.

However, where we sometimes get a bit *unimaginative*, and fall down on the job, is in the development of those skills needed for leadership. All of you here today (in the pews, on the stream, and reading the emailed sermon) are servants by nature. But the future of our church, and the fate of the Kingdom of God, now demands that you become servants who lead. We’ve got lots of people willing to say, “How can I help?”; and that’s great. What we really need now, however, are people who are willing to cultivate those requisite skills for *Leadership*, some of which may not come easily or naturally, in order to enable us say, “This is how we, as a church, are going to help.”

XIII.

So here, using today’s scripture reading, are some leadership skills for us to work on:

Contribute Uniqueness

James and John could not get beyond seeing themselves through the lens of old patterns and assumptions. Each of you brings both a unique perspective and a unique skill-set to our church. Next time you come to church, take a hard look to discover both what you notice that needs doing, and what *you* might be uniquely suited to do.

Act Effectively

James and John lost their focus and squandered their energy by choosing to fight the wrong battles rather than preparing for the real future which was to come. Where do you see our church getting the most bang for our buck?

What obstacles can we avoid, and how can we move most effectively and more quickly to confront the challenges we *must* face? What are the *right* things for us to be caring about as a church?

XIV.

Be Resilient

Jesus knew hard times were coming. He knew James and John should be less concerned about where they would sit to be served, and more concerned about how to remain standing in order to serve others. Sometimes, we in the church allow the dream of perfection to stand in the way of progress. We should not allow the fear of failing as a church, stop us from actually *being* the church. We need to be the church we *are*, and serve as the church God intends us to be rather than the church we think we *ought* to be.

XV.

Embrace The *Right* Change

James and John saw that change was coming, and they earnestly sought to embrace it; but, it was the wrong change. We in the church excel at following traditions and acting out of good habits, but very often we fail to look for the sacred which will shock us. By all means, let's make plans, honor our past, and keep doing all the good things we have always done, but let us also keep watch out of the imaginative and hope-filled corner of our eyes for the surprising new thing God has always visited upon the people of faith. Moreover, when it arrives, and it most certainly will, let us be sure we embrace the *new* grace that will be in this place.

XVI.

Keep the meaning and purpose of the work and mission of our church in the forefront of your mind, and always harken back to it in your heart if ever you lose your way. Realize you only have to take your turn at bat every once in a while. First and foremost, a church is a team, so let others take *their* turn; and, while they do, find time to rest and rejuvenate. Get good at feeding yourself, caring for yourself and, perhaps, most importantly, get good at forgiving yourself.

The future is upon us, the world is changing and, as Christ's disciples, we have a great deal to do in the service of others; because we are, first and

foremost, servants by *nature*. However, let us also learn to be leaders by *necessity* that we might become that great and glorious church God has called us to be. Amen.