

## “Lead By Example”

Matthew 23:1-12  
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When I graduated from seminary in 1975, our Baccalaureate preacher was the school’s president, Dr. Roy Pearson. He preached from a text in the book of Exodus where Moses has been up on Mt. Sinai for what seems like a very long time. God speaks directly to Moses saying, “You have been up on this mountain, with your head high above the clouds, long enough; it’s time to come down and get to work.” It was Dr. Pearson’s way of telling us we had been sequestered in the hallowed halls of academia long enough, and that it was time to be out in the vineyard doing the work for which we had prepared. Like one of those birds known for pushing the young hatchlings out of the nest, he was pushing us out of the classroom into the real world.

By Chapter 23 in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus has reached that same place with his disciples as Dr. Pearson had reached with my peers and me. Jesus was ready to give the Baccalaureate address. And he chose to speak about leadership, leadership by example. He does this in two ways; with negative images and then with positive images.

He points to certain leaders of his day: the ones who expect the best seat in the house, the ones who thrive on pomp and circumstance, the ones who give a lot of orders but never lift a finger themselves; and he says, essentially, **‘They already have their reward. My disciples will lead with a different style’**.

He points, then, to the servant: the one not afraid of soiling his hands, the one not worried about what the neighbors might think, the one poised to lend a hand to relieve the burden of another; and he says, essentially, **‘the way to abundant life is the way of servanthood.’**

This is a hard truth to preach on November 2, 2008 as the world watches our nation select new leaders. This is a hard truth to lift up in a culture where leadership is often associated with power and clout and seizing the advantage. In our culture, servant leaders are looked upon with suspicion, with an element of distrust, as if they might have a hidden agenda.

Yet, here in the New Testament, in the book we name as our sacred text, we find Jesus at a leadership training seminar lifting up the servant as the ideal image for leadership in faith communities and in the world. This morning, I feel moved to suggest that churches have a leadership role to play in their communities, and that those churches who choose to lead in the servant’s image are the churches where abundance of life may be found.

And this is what people are hungry for, abundance of life. In this congregation we have a lot of very smart people. Those among us who are truly wise are the ones who know that abundance is found in a servant’s heart. I can’t turn on the radio or the television these days without hearing about the financial crisis, without hearing about the latest dip in the Wall Street numbers, without hearing the latest statistics on home mortgage foreclosures. Yet there is an astounding abundance of life at this church because someone let the cat out of the bag, someone let the word get out: **servant leadership is the source of the true abundance.**

One of the great stories of leadership handed down within the Jewish community is about a rabbi who every year on Yom Kippur, gathered his flock at the synagogue for an all-day ritual of atonement. At mid-day the rabbi would mysteriously disappear for a time and then reappear with a glow on his face. Year after year the people wondered where their leader had vanished.

So, on this one occasion, they appointed a small group to follow him to see the mysterious location of his retreat. They followed him to the home of an elderly widow where they watched him remove his coat, roll up his sleeves, put on work boots, and then proceed to do the woman's laundry, scrub her floors, air out her linens, brush her hair, wash her feet, and prepare a pot of soup for her supper. Then, he put his dress shoes and coat back on, buttoned his shirt sleeves, and returned to the synagogue.

When the secret witnesses returned, everyone demanded to know where the rabbi had gone. Did he ascend to heaven? Had he met with the angels? And when the witnesses revealed their truth, they wept as they told about their learned leader mopping the floor and washing the socks. He had found his way to that place of abundance, that place where the wallet may be empty, but where the heart is full.

We try to teach servant leadership in every setting of church life, even at Wednesday School. Following the meal, we have one rule. Everyone works until all the work is done. I wish you all could be there to watch the miracle that unfolds in the social hall. Within three minutes, 12 tables and 75 chairs disappear. Serving platters land back in the kitchen. Paper products vanish from sight. Spills are swept up clean. This is all servant work and no one is above it. A lot of people think that our youth flock to church on Wednesdays because the food is so good, but I say it's because the servant work is so exhilarating!

On Communion Sundays, Lynne and I gather with the deacons before the service begins. We talk about being the resident servants, the ones who welcome the stranger at the door, the ones who serve the meal, the ones who notice who needs a little TLC, the ones who model the joy that comes with literally waiting upon another. On Communion Sundays in particular, we reflect on what it means to be a servant leader.

Every board and committee, every officer and volunteer would do well to reflect on what it means to conduct his or her aspect of the church's ministry as a servant. From Investment Committee to Christian Service, from adult mission trippers to Nursery School aides, from choir members to church treasurers, from Sunday ushers to lay preachers, from gleaners to knitters; how can I do this work with the humility Jesus had in mind? How can I model the spiritual abundance that blossoms whenever the servant leadership style is engaged?

In my heart of hearts, I believe this is what keeps a church community growing in faith; it's what keeps a church family alive to the Spirit; it's what keeps a congregation vital in mission; it's what keeps a church healthy... leadership that is grounded in a servant's image. I was thinking about handing out aprons this morning, an apron for everyone because an apron is a servant symbol. But I knew that was not needed here, no outward sign is necessary. The inner identity of the servant leader is already well established. I see it everywhere I turn.

Recently, I was visiting with a choir member who is recovering from breast cancer. The chemo-therapy has robbed her of her hair. As we talked, she asked if I had noticed the upbeat ball cap she was sporting, obviously hand-decorated with love and compassion. The thoughtfulness of the gift and the hat itself had had a transforming impact on this choir singer.

She asked if I knew about this certain woman's ministry of stitchery, and I admitted I had no idea. I had no idea because it's one of those servant ministries that goes on behind the scenes, not interested in a front row seat, not interested in a loud drum roll or a public recognition. This is what I witness around here all the time! It's as if the call to servant leadership has caught on!

So, I thank God for all of you who have discovered the mystery of abundant life through simple acts of servanthood. It's the style of leadership Jesus had in mind. In the greatest of hope. Amen!