

“Servant Leadership”

Mark 9:30-37

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Jesus enjoyed using the language of paradox. A paradox invites us to stand on our heads and see the world upside down. A paradox is a wonderful teaching mechanism because it responds to a question by forcing the questioner to reflect more deeply on the issue at hand. Part of Jesus' genius as a teacher is his mastery of the paradox. There are always those who would prefer a straight answer, an easy answer. But Jesus isn't interested in handing out easy answers. He wants his disciples to fish around in the deeper waters, probing beneath the surface, finding those truths that endure.

To a disciple seeking wisdom, he might suggest first dancing with foolishness. You want to be wise? First, be a fool. To one seeking the security of wealth, he might suggest choosing a life of poverty. Give it all away and then you will know what true wealth really is! To the one seeking greatness, he suggests humility is the right path.

In the passage from Mark, the disciples come off more as a pack of adolescent boys than a community of adults. They are into playing the greatness game. We can picture them walking down a dirt road vying for one-ups-man ship, flexing their discipleship muscles. One is saying, I am the greatest because I have brought in more money to the treasury than the rest of you. One is saying I am the greatest because I have the voice of a golden orator. Another argues I am the greatest because I have a persuasive way with the young people. On and on it goes as if they were candidates for political office. Each one thinks he has the inside track with Jesus. Each one thinks he is the greatest thing since sliced bread.

Jesus sees this motley crew coming along the road and quickly constructs a paradoxical rebuke. “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.” That halted them in their tracks! Last of all? Servant of all? Not their view of greatness! Not the culture’s vision of greatness! Not anybody’s vision of greatness! Except for this One who teaches as no one has ever taught, except for this One who teaches with the authority of God!

Now he has their attention! He has caught them off guard and he has their undivided attention! He picks up a child and sets the child down in the midst of these greatness-seeking disciples. Now, all eyes are on the child. At that time in history, and in that culture, children were at the absolute bottom of the social totem pole. They had no rights. They had no authority. They had no voice. They were considered a nuisance, an annoyance, a commodity to be tolerated but not celebrated. So, in essence, Jesus chooses the lowliest symbol within reach! Then the challenge!

“Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.”

Let me give you my translation of that verse. Whoever offers hospitality to the one who sits on the bottom rung of society is actually offering hospitality to God! To welcome one who has no power is to welcome the One who has all the power!

So, the mark of true greatness has to do with the willingness; indeed, the eagerness to welcome the one whom no one else chooses to welcome.

That reminds me, of course, of the Statue of Liberty. I can barely recite the inscription on that majestic symbol of welcome without tears welling up in my eyes.

Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,
Send these, the homeless, the tempest-tossed,
To me: I lift my lamp beside the golden door.

In my view, America is at her greatest when she celebrates that hallowed invitation sitting in New York Harbor. I can't speak as a historian, but I can as a theologian. Nations rise to greatness when they assume that posture of welcome. Nations fall from greatness when they cease to welcome the child, that is, the one on the bottom step of the ladder.

I've often wondered what I might do if I were no longer a minister in a local church. After discarding every other suggestion, I settle on being a maitre-d in a local restaurant. The maitre-d' is a servant. The maitre-d' is the one to make every single person feel as if they had been expected all along, especially without having had a reservation. The maitre-d makes each person feel like the seat selected for them is a royal throne, a place reserved for celebrities. For several years, my half-brother, Shaun, was the maitre-d' at the Student Prince up in Springfield, Massachusetts. I got a kick out of watching him play this role. He went about his work with a certain flair, welcoming the after-prom crowd with their tuxedos but also welcoming the co-ed adult softball team just in from their game. Both groups had worked up a considerable sweat, and all were made to feel extraordinarily welcome!

When Jesus scooped up that child and set her down in the midst of those disciples, I think he wanted those adults to see the child in a new way. Instead of seeing the child as just another kid, another nuisance, another hindrance; I think Jesus wanted them to see in that child's face the very face of God. This is how a servant leader operates. A servant leader sees the sacred in the other.

I know there are many schools of leadership. The model of leadership Jesus offers is counter-cultural. It is not hierarchical. It requires no college education. It is an up-side-down model. It identifies greatness with humility. It identifies greatness with servanthood. It identifies greatness with valuing, finally, those individuals who are devalued by the mainstream.

The church today is hungry for this kind of leadership. I am convinced that the churches that are growing in numbers and also in spirit are the ones where servant leadership prevails, where people throughout the congregation look into the face of the other and see the face of God. That is what makes for a truly great church! In the greatest of hope, Amen!