

Sermon – October 17, 2021 – Pentecost 21 Yr B – Servant Leader

Mark 10:35-45

³⁵James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” ³⁶And he said to them, “What is it you want me to do for you?” ³⁷And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” ³⁸But 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?” ³⁹They 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; ⁴⁰but 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.”

⁴¹When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. ⁴²So 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. ⁴³But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. ⁴⁵For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

Sermon

We've all had people in our lives who have served us...and in their unassuming ways have left their lasting impressions on us.

There are big name servant leaders: Our Lord himself, Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Pope Francis and St Francis whose name he chose.

There are also the small name servant leaders; a parent, or both parents, an auntie, an uncle, a teacher or a Sunday School teacher who made a difference, showed us the way. These are the servant leaders we all have known. Maybe many of us **are** servant leaders ourselves!

I have had a few. There was Aunt Margie who greeted us with warm hugs, a great big smile and laugh. Even if we appeared unannounced, even if her sink was full of dishes and all she could offer us was sandwiches, we felt loved at Aunt Margie's. There was her sister Aunt Esther who sat on my bed the night of my father's funeral when I was 13, comforting me. There was Mr MacLeay, my high school guidance counselor who talked to troubled me. There was Sheila, my mother in law, who became like a mother to me. These were servant leaders, unsung heroes. They reached out, putting others' welfare before their own.

To become great, you must be a servant Jesus says.

Jesus also says whoever wishes to be first... must be slave of all.

This is the model our Lord gives us in word and his own example ending in his death.

I Googled '**servant leaders in Canada**' and was surprised to find it is a current leadership model.

Servant leadership as a leadership theory was originally proposed in an essay written in 1970 by R K Greenleaf in Westfield, Indiana. In this essay, Greenleaf pondered the leadership of Leo, a character in the mythical story Journey to the East, written by Herman Hesse.

Leo is the servant of a group travelling across the desert. He does everything for the travelers, serving in any way needed. But when Leo disappears, the group realizes that Leo was actually their leader. He led through his serving. Greenleaf pondered this paradox and wrote that the test of servant leadership is to ask "[d]o those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?"² Blanchard and Hodges expanded on Greenleaf's writings and wrote that "servant

leaders look at leadership as an act of service.”³ Servant leadership is not soft leadership; rather, it is a viable form of leadership that can generate exceptional results.

As Greenleaf himself states, Servant Leaders are leaders who put other people’s needs above their own. Servant Leadership philosophy offers a different perspective from traditional authoritarian styles of leadership and instead focuses on sharing of power and control with those the leader is responsible for so they can reach their full potential.

Surprisingly, there is a Servant Leadership Academy in Regina Saskatchewan. It is based on the writings of Greenleaf. One can take courses there and be accredited as an ‘Advocate’, ‘Practitioner’, ‘Mentor’, and ‘Executive’.

I also found an interesting case study about a Canadian health care executive who led a remarkable turnaround of St Michael’s Health Centre, a floundering and almost bankrupt nursing home in Lethbridge, Alberta. In less than 7 years, Kevin Cowan turned around the finances and changed numerous broken relationships into strategic alliances. Under his leadership, St Michael’s Health Centre went from being one of the most underperforming health care organizations in Canada, to one of the most innovative.

Cowan used four specific strategies. I believe these strategies are in harmony with our Lord’s way of doing things. So let’s look at them:

1. get in their face

Cowan did not avoid his enemies and criticizers; rather, he would find the enemy and sit down with that person over coffee to hear their side. It is easier to hate a nameless enemy “over there,” than it is to hate someone sharing coffee with you.

These meetings slowly turned adversarial relationships to amiable ones. Cowan would intentionally spend about 95% of the time talking about the person and what they needed. He would learn about their interests, their children, their families, and their difficulties. He would not engage in arguments but instead listen to their negative attacks on Saint Michael’s Health Centre. After they tired themselves out with animosity, he would offer to help them with whatever they needed. He did not rely on formal written contracts or rigid meeting agendas.

Most of his deals were formed with a handshake and a smile.

This strategy also worked with the various unions at Saint Michaels Health Centre. Cowan intentionally spent time meeting with the union leaders, getting to know them as people so he would feel empathy for him.

Actually feeling empathy for those around them, and truly caring is a hallmark of a servant leader. Cowan would not have been able to fake this empathy, and getting in people's faces requires a genuine openness few leaders are able to embody.

2. Offer to serve, rather than be served

Servant leaders do not talk about themselves; they talk about others and partner with others to achieve great things.

Cowan asked in nearly every meeting and interaction, **“what can I do to make your life easier?”** In one example, Chinook Health Region purchased a retail building and planned to convert it to office and health care space. They publicly announced these plans but then realized the building was not suitable. This action had cost them approximately US\$1 million taxpayer dollars, which enraged the citizens of Lethbridge. The Chinook Health Region leaders called a press conference to explain. Cowan heard about this press conference and, shortly before the conference, offered to put the program and office space in the Saint Michael's Health Centre building instead.

He found a win-win solution, when he could have easily sat back and watched The Chinook Health Region flounder in the press conference. He then recruited the Saint Michael's Health Centre board chair to sit with the Chinook Health Region executives – the former enemies of SMHC – to publicly announce their partnership. The city was so shocked to see them working together that the actual story died right there. Cowan's approach in this example is the epitome of servant leadership. The norms in the organization Cowan inherited involved fighting first. Cowan flipped that norm and sought to serve first.

3. weed the garden

Servant leadership requires a direct and fair method to deal with problem employees.³ Servant leaders realize that, sometimes, ill-fitted or ill-performing employees must be “weeded out” of the organization and set up to succeed elsewhere. Cowan was not afraid to confront this.

He went through numerous arbitrations and paid out severance if he needed to. He did not make excuses for not dealing with these employees, and was one of the most aggressive CEOs in Alberta in dealing with underperforming employees

4. give the credit away

A hallmark of Cowan's leadership style was that he constantly gave credit away to others around him.

Cowan also found ways to credit his adversaries for their successes. Some took this credit without realizing it was Cowan who gave it to them. This paradox of power is an intriguing aspect of servant leadership. Who is more powerful: the one who chooses to serve another or the one who has no choice but to receive that serving? The giver is usually more powerful than the receiver. While Cowan had limited financial means to give to the Chinook Health Region, he reconciled the power imbalance by serving the leaders there. In a paradoxical way, Cowan actually gained power over the CHR through his serving.

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These strategies demonstrate the servant leadership approach and provide anecdotal evidence that authentic servant leadership may be a key to invoking innovative organizational change.

I think these servant strategies flesh out for us what our Lord meant when he said

To become great, you must be a servant

and whoever wishes to be first... must be slave of all.

How these words of Jesus shape our understanding of what it is to follow him? How shall we serve him? Amen.