

## **SERVING AS A LEADER**

**MATTHEW 5: 1-12**

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We are in the last week of a sermon series on leadership. Week one we talked about following the leader – we said as God’s children made in God’s image we have an innate ability to recognize and respond to the truth.

Following the leader has to do with recognizing and following the light of Christ, the light of truth in others when we see it. Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa. There is hope in the world for this reason – humans are able to sort through light and darkness, goodness and evil, truth and falsehood.

Last week we talked about becoming a leader. We said leadership comes more from within than without. Our qualifications for leadership are not in a degree or title so much as in the condition of our souls. Leaders are in touch with their souls. They project light rather than shadow onto others and create conditions in the home, office, church where others blossom.

Today I want to make some points about servant leadership and extend an invitation. The notion of servant leadership was made famous twenty five years ago by Robert Greenleaf who wrote a book that had and still has enormous influence. The Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership was established and continues to carry the founder’s message. Greenleaf developed his training course while he was an executive at AT&T. His message was directed to corporate America but has had much wider impact.

But if we took a survey today many of us who don’t know Robert Greenleaf would see Jesus as a servant-leader. Which is point one – Jesus was the archetypal servant leader. Yet the words seem exclusive of one another. How can a leader serve or a servant lead? Jesus was clear washing the feet of his disciples: “I came not to be served but to serve.”

Servant leadership was the distinguishing feature of the Jesus movement – the early church – that was attempting to introduce a radically new and different way of living. Jesus had a name for this new way of being together. He called it the Kingdom of God. Everything he said and did pointed to the Kingdom of God.

Jesus charged his followers to help him usher in this Kingdom – by living like him; doing what he did; letting others unfamiliar with the Kingdom experience the life-affirming way of true community.

This morning’s Scripture reading – the first twelve verses of the Sermon on the Mount known as the Beatitudes – is a kind of Magna Carta for the Kingdom of God. A statement of principles and rights for citizenship in God’s Kingdom.

This kingdom is a place where those who mourn will be blessed, the persecuted belong to God, the meek inherit the earth, the merciful shown mercy, the pure in heart they shall see God. It is a place that turns the natural world upside down.

Remember, Matthew was speaking to Jewish Christians in Jerusalem.

They were living under the Roman occupation army – an unsteady alliance of convenience built on a hierarchical distribution of power.

And here is a good question: what are we doing encouraging servant leadership in a world that continues to step on servants, squash the merciful, trample the pure in heart?

William Willimon, former chaplain of Duke University, talks about shaking hands with a worshipper one Sunday at the door. The man said, “the trouble with you preachers is that you are always talking about something so far removed from my world, where I really live, as to be incomprehensible.”

But Willimon wonders out loud, “do we really want to just accept the world in which we all live – as it is.” And of course the church’s answer to that question over the centuries has been a resounding “No!”

And so point two this morning is: followers of the Servant Leader are called to change the world. Yet, how serious are we about changing this world? A world Thomas Hobbes famously declared to be “solitary, hard, brutish, and short.” The litmus test is this: how we see the world and how we see what kind of world it can be determines how we act.

Some people look at the world and then look at the world Christians envision and conclude that the Christian view is unrealistic.

Before we know it we are in a debate between our conscience – what we know is right and wrong – and our ego – looking out for number one. But we call this a debate not between conscience and ego, but disguise it as a debate between the ‘real’ and the ‘ideal’ and abandon our conscience.

Point three: servant leadership is grounded in conscience not in some remote ideal; in the inner sense of right and wrong and not in ego. Steven Covey of *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* fame puts it this way. Conscience is the still small voice within.

Conscience is quiet and peaceful.

Ego is tyrannical, despotic, dictatorial. Ego focuses on one’s own survival and pleasure to the exclusion of others. It sees relationships as threat or no threat – like little children who label all people or dogs as nice or mean.

Conscience sees life in terms of service and contribution and others’ well being, sees itself as part of the larger whole working for the greater good.

Conscience deeply reveres people and sees and believes in the unique potential of each person and is willing to take risks to enable the blossoming of each child of God.

Ego is threatened by negative feedback and punishes the messenger. It interprets all data in terms of self-preservation. It censors information. It denies reality.

Conscience values feedback, isn’t afraid of sharing information or of disagreement, it seeks collaboration and deep change.<sup>1</sup>

The inner light or awareness of right and wrong is not confined to the wisdom of any one religion but is a universal phenomenon affirmed by all legitimate religions.

But it is also clear in Jesus’ words and actions that this moral or conscience-centered way of living is at the core of his life, the new life.

Conscience-centered living permeates the spirit of the Beatitudes.

Now my invitation. You can see where this is going. If we are not going to accept the world the way it is, the alternative is to embrace a cause worthy of our full commitment.

I love George Bernard Shaw's comment about what it meant to give his life to a cause bigger than he was: here is true joy in life, being used for something you regard as a mighty purpose. Being a force for change instead of a feverish, selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy. I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the whole community. I want to be used up when I die. The harder I work the more I live. Life is no 'brief candle' to me. It is a splendid torch which I've got to hold up for the moment. I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it to future generations.<sup>ii</sup>

You see, if when you heard the Scriptures read this morning you said to yourself, peacemaker, persecuted for righteousness' sake, pure of heart – I could never be or do those things – then I want to ask you this morning to reconsider.

I want to ask all of us today to reconsider recommitting our lives to a cause bigger than ourselves. To consider committing to becoming servant leaders. Engaging the struggle between our ego and conscience. Letting go of fear-driven decision making that isolates and live in a way that puts others first.

This is the nature of legitimate power and greatness Robert Greenleaf was talking about. But we saw and heard it in Jesus 2,000 years ago.

We should never separate the means from the ends of our living. 'Because I have paid my dues or because I am trying to acquire the resources to live comfortably – I will suspend this business of servant leadership. I can't afford it now but some day....' Followers of Jesus are called today to embody life in the new world, the Kingdom of God.

As much as it will do for others being a servant leader, a conscience-centered leader will transform your life. Like the nursing student who breezed through an exam and was startled by the last question, "what is first name of the woman who cleans the school?"

"Is this a joke?" she asked. "No," said the professor "it counts on your final grade. In your career you will meet all kinds of people, each significant, each a child of God, each deserving your care." That student who became a nurse never forgot the lesson she learned that day or the cleaning woman's name which she later learned was Dorothy.<sup>iii</sup>

Two weeks from yesterday our elected leaders and the committees of the church will meet to receive two important reports. The first has to do with needed and long overdue improvements to our building – to make it safe and accessible for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The second report is the long-awaited Big Audacious Goal for Mission. It is a visionary goal and builds on our strong presence and partnership on the West Side of Buffalo.

The only way this mission will work is if we, individually and as a congregation, recommit to becoming servant leaders.

I see it this way. In a world where ego-driven leadership is common we are called to be an outpost for a way of life that brings hope and renewal. Wherever conscience guides decisions and people define themselves in service to one another families and churches and schools and offices are healed and transformed.

How will you and I impact the world, this community, our families? What will our legacy be?

Ultimately it doesn't have to do with which part of the red or blue political map we belong to. It has to do with our stature as servants. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Steven Covey, "Forward," to Servant Leadership: a journey into the nature of legitimate power and greatness, Robert K. Greenleaf (New York: Paulist Press, 2002), 1ff.

<sup>ii</sup> Covey, 8.

<sup>iii</sup> Covey, 10.