

Trinity 21 2018

James and John, who are brothers ask Jesus for a big favour. They want the best seats in the house, the ones right beside Jesus, when he finally is enthroned as king. They have a strong appetite for prestige and power.

The other ten disciples are no better. They become angry at James and John because they also want the best seats as well. They also want prestige and power.

All twelve disciples miss the point about the kingship of Jesus. Even though he has told them repeatedly of his approaching execution and resurrection, they just do not understand.

In contrast to their misunderstanding, stories appear shortly before and after today's gospel where Jesus heals blind people. We hear of the first blind person healed that "He looked intently, and was restored, and saw everyone clearly" (8:25).

We hear of the second blind person Jesus healed that he "received his sight, and followed Jesus in the way," in other words, became a disciple (10:52).

But as for the twelve, they do not see everything clearly, continue to miss the point and their following of Jesus is handicapped by persistent blindness.

Yet the failure of the twelve to understand can be for us a cause of hope. For each of us is sometimes blind to what discipleship requires. Jesus did not give up on his original twelve and he does not give up on us. He continues to set forth the true nature of his kingdom and invites us to walk where he has walked.

It was all about Jesus' style of leadership. We each have our own styles of leadership which we exercise in the different aspects that our lives unfold. We are each invited to exercise leadership, sometimes in modest, informal ways we barely notice and sometimes perhaps in ways that involve titles and prominence and the burden of being a public person.

Whatever form our leadership takes, let this be characteristic of it: that we follow the example Jesus offers us of a leadership that is servant leadership.

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Jesus claims the role of servant by word and deed. He says he has come "not to be served, but to serve" (10:46). And at his final meal before his death, he

scandalizes his followers by kneeling before them to wash their feet as though he is their lackey and not their lord.

The term “servant leadership” was coined by Robert Greenleaf in the 1970s.

*"The servant-leader is servant first... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is leader first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions...The leader-first and the servant-first are two extreme types. Between them there are shadings and blends that are part of the infinite variety of human nature."*

*"The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served. The best test, and difficult to administer, is: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived?"*

This is not to say that the servant leader lacks ambition. The persistent servant leader is probably someone with strong ambition who chases after a bold vision and refuses to take no for an answer.

An easy demonstration of this would be to have a group photo taken of all of us here at this service, and then to pass the picture around for everybody to see. Each of us, upon taking this photo in hand, would probably look at ourselves first and only then at others in the group.

The problem is not that we want to be great. The problem is that so often our definition of greatness is puny. We accept the sad models for greatness the world offers us, and we overlook the model Jesus talks about and lives out and dies for, the model which alone advances his resurrection kingdom, namely the servant as leader, the leader as servant.

Much of the suffering in the world around us is due to a desperate shortage of servant leaders. Numerous high positions of every sort are occupied by two kinds of people: those too timid to do what is right, and people whose lust for power, control, or profit blinds them to even the most elementary decencies.

If our society wants any future that is worth having, we must cultivate more and more servant leaders for countless roles in society. Servant leadership needs to flourish in the complexities of those vast organizations that have so much

control over our lives—government agencies, business corporations, hospitals, universities, and many others. Servant leadership at every level is essential if the impact of these organizations on all of us is to be a blessing and not a disgrace.

A parish can assess itself in many ways that are helpful. These include membership growth, spiritual practices, relationships among members, income spent outside the parish, and programs of outreach and witness.

I'd like to include another factor by which a parish can assess itself. It is one that is rarely mentioned and may be hard to track, but is of vital importance. I speak of the way the parish develops and supports servant leaders.

How is the parish helping people to flourish as servant leaders who function not only within the church, but out in the wide world?

How do members of the parish function as servant leaders, not only in personal contacts, but through participation in those vast organizations that influence all our lives so much?

My prayer is that St. Mary's will continue to be a community that nurtures and supports servant leaders: leaders who empower others, who are not bosses but coaches, who are not bullies but models.

The world is desperate for leaders of this kind who recognize God's blessing in their own lives, leaders brave and bold enough to bless the people and the world around them through their humble service. Perhaps these words from the service of Ordination of Deacons will give us a clue.

*"In the name of our Lord, we bid you remember the greatness of the trust in which you are now to share: the ministry of Christ himself, who for our sake took the form of a servant. Remember always with thanksgiving that the people among whom you will minister are made in God's image and likeness.*

The servant leader is the highest model of leadership because it is the closest we get to the example of Jesus.

Amen.

















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The term “servant leadership” was coined by Robert Greenleaf a few decades back. The reality, however, appears in the New Testament and also in the lives of great leaders. Here’s one story from our country’s Revolutionary War.

A group of exhausted soldiers were struggling and straining to repair a small defensive barrier. One of them shouted orders at the others, but made no attempt to help them.

Suddenly a civilian came by on horseback. He asked the soldier in charge why he wasn’t helping in the effort. The soldier responded, “Sir, I am a corporal!”

The stranger apologized, dismounted, and helped the exhausted soldiers in their work. Once the job was done, he turned to the corporal and said, “Corporal, next time you have a job like this and not enough men to do it, go to your commander-in-chief and I will come and help you again.”

With that, George Washington got on his horse and rode off.

Our country’s first president found himself in a situation that invited him to demonstrate servant leadership. You and I also face opportunities to exercise that leadership. It may be a casual encounter as it was for Washington riding by that day. Or it may be far more intentional, when we prepare ourselves arduously and over a long period of time for an opportunity to serve. But whatever form it takes, servant leadership happens when we place the welfare of others ahead of our desire for power or prestige or possessions. The servant leader places others before self and acts on that basis and thereby changes the world for good.

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Today's gospel was the text for one of the most memorable sermons preached by Martin Luther King, Jr. He titled it "The Drum Major Instinct," and you can hear recordings of it on the internet.

Dr. King defines the drum major instinct as "a desire to be out in front, a desire to lead the parade, a desire to be first." He tells us that "it is something that runs the whole gamut of life." All of us have this drum major instinct, King tells us. We keep asking life to put us first.

An easy demonstration of this would be to have a group photo taken of all of us here at this service, and then to pass the picture around for everybody to see. Each of us, upon taking this photo in hand, would probably look at ourselves first and only then at others in the group.

Yes, to some degree all of us have the drum major instinct. And often this instinct gets us into trouble. We get into trouble with it, and may not even realize how deep that trouble is.

Yet the problem is not the drum major instinct in itself. The problem is not that we want to be great. The problem is that so often our definition of greatness is puny. We accept the sad models for greatness the world offers us, and we overlook the model Jesus talks about and lives out and dies for, the model which alone advances his resurrection kingdom, namely the servant as leader, the leader as servant.

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My prayer is that St. Christopher's, this parish close to the nation's capital, is now and will continue to be a community that nurtures and supports servant leaders: leaders who empower others, who are not bosses but coaches, who are not bullies but models.

The world is desperate for leaders of this kind who recognize God's blessing in their own lives, leaders brave and bold enough to bless the people and the world around them through their humble service.