

“Serve to Lead”

Sermon – January 12, 2020 Stone Presbyterian Church

American civil rights leader and Baptist minister Benjamin Hooks said,
“If you think you are leading and turn around to see no one following,
then you are just taking a walk.”

For much of my secular career I was a manager, mostly of engineers and technical types. And I received a lot of good formal and informal training of how to be a manager and a leader that I was able to put in the practice—minus my own, uh, shortcomings.

A key item the training highlighted was that you did not have to be a formally appointed manager to be a leader. Anyone can be leader. There are lots of definitions of a leader, but one is from President John Quincy Adams,

“If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader.”

This definition could also be used for a type of leadership that management consultant Robert Greenleaf coined in 1970 as “servant leadership.” Servant leadership promotes and emphasizes the need for the leader of a group to put the needs of others before his own, and to motivate others to develop and perform in the best way possible.

A servant leader is one who considers himself to be one of his followers, and a servant of the people who follow him.

The idea is that if a leader helps the people on his or her team to develop and they see the leader working with them, then they will feel more valued and motivated and the team overall will perform better.

There are number of examples of good servant leaders that you know:

Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa to name a few.

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And there are notable negatives examples, as well, but I’ll let you think of those yourself.

Though the term “servant leadership” is only 50 years old, the practice goes back to ancient times.

We actually see it in today’s First Testament lesson. As I mentioned last week, scholars divide the book of Isaiah into three subbooks, if you will. Today’s lesson is from so-called Second Isaiah during the time that the Jews were in exile in Babylon. Whereas First Isaiah, which took place 200 years prior, was filled with warnings and judgment, Second Isaiah has a message of comfort and hope.

In today’s passage we encounter the image not of a conquering king, but of the (suffering) servant of God. The servant is described as “a bruised reed” and “a dimly burning wick.” However, because of God’s spirit that works through him, the servant will not be broken or quenched, rather he will faithfully continue his mission, establishing justice on the earth.

The servant offers a profound example of power in the midst of vulnerability—a sharp contrast with the brutal force executed by the empires of the day.

The remarkable thing we see in this text is how the people who have been traumatized by the exile are called not to do the typical human thing of “circling the wagons” and “hunkering down” and hardening into “us vs. them.”

Instead, the prophet offers a vision of the world in which an individual or a group of people in the midst of brokenness, in spite of brokenness,

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and maybe even because of the brokenness, will be a light to the nations.

We see this in the second lesson today from Acts. Previous to today’s passage, Peter has a dream of eating unclean food by Jewish standards that God declares clean with God telling him that the Good News is for non-Jews also and so he ends up eating with a Gentile convert named Cornelius.

At the beginning of today’s text he proclaims his “epiphany”—that when Jesus said he was Lord of all that didn’t just mean all Jews or even the Samaritans. Kind of like us realizing a century after our Declaration of Independence that “all men are created equal” meant African-Americans also and sixty years after that, that we really meant “all people—men and women—are created equal,” though, arguably, both those points are still more of an ideal than a done deal.

In Acts 2 we hear the Pentecost story where there are pious Jews from “every nation” in Jerusalem and how the Holy Spirit came upon them.

Today, we hear from Acts 10 that “every nation” includes the pious and righteous people whom God finds acceptable be they Jew or Gentile Yet this radical inclusion of Gentiles does not mean the exclusion of Israel as Peter’s speech makes clear; it means the inclusion of all people. More than just enlarging the circle, it means opening the door and actively reaching out for any and all who want to join.

And just to make the point, God pours out the Holy Spirit on all who hear the word, even before Peter is finish speaking. It is not even the Apostle Peter who gets to decide who comes in—it is God; humans are

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merely instruments of God. Hence, Peter commands these new non-Jewish believers to be baptized, not so they can receive the Spirit, but as an affirmation of the blessing of God.

In other words, God's love takes up residence in human hearts. In baptism we celebrate the new life we have in Christ. It is also the place where we are joined to Christ. When assailed by doubt or overcome by despair, we can always point to our baptism as evidence that God's love has not passed us by.

And so we come to Jesus' baptism in today's gospel lesson from Matthew.

John protests saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”

Jesus answers him—with his very first words in Matthew's gospel—

“Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.”

In other words, Matthew indicates that this baptism is a collaborative effort. John must concede to baptize Jesus; Jesus must seek the baptism of John. Together, their obedience to God's plans is a step on the path of righteousness.

And "to fulfill all righteousness" means acting in obedience to God in a way that coordinates internal dispositions and external action. Jesus' first steps in public ministry are a combination of a compliant spirit and a powerful, public display of his obedience to God's call.

This act was not only a modeling of submission and a consecration to his coming mission, it was also an act of being in “solidarity with sinners.” Standing in solidarity with those who often feel unworthy of

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God’s love and grace is a powerful act that is vividly portrayed here and throughout the ministry of Jesus

That Jesus' baptism is essential and a step of righteousness is confirmed by the divine voice, a voice we hear only twice in Matthew—here on the Baptism of Our Lord, the first Sunday in the Epiphany season and again on the Transfiguration of Our Lord, the last Sunday in the Epiphany Season with almost the same words: “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” God's approval is unequivocal. Jesus is reaffirmed as God's child as he begins his journey to the cross.

Moreover, God's love for Jesus is reaffirmed as well. Though Jesus' life will be characterized by temptation and suffering, God's love is no less real. God's approval of Jesus is multifold. He and John together have acted in obedience to God at this moment, and now Jesus goes forward, not diverting from the straight path laid before him.

So we see that Jesus leadership began by serving. And continued throughout his ministry of cavorting with the sinners, comforting those on the margins, and even washing the feet of his disciples.

Therefore, our model is “serve to lead,” not worrying about what we can do, but simply letting God work through us as he did when Peter preached the Good News to the Gentiles.

As the songwriter and theologian Leonard Cohen says in his song, “Anthem”: “Forget your perfect offering, there is a crack in everything, but that is where the light gets in.”

That is where the light comes in. God’s grace and power works exactly there where we are broken, where we are most fragile.

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So when we feel helpless and out of control, remember the example of the suffering servant that even in the midst of the most dire of circumstances, we still have the power to make a difference in the lives of the people around us because God is with us.

So, go and serve, having been baptized in the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.