October 6th , 2019

Springfield Presbyterian Church

Ordinary Time

10:30 am

Servant Leadership

1. Undercover Boss

There’s a show called ‘Undercover Boss’ where CEOs go ‘undercover’ with a full makeover and step out of boardrooms and into warehouses, kitchens, and places in which their lower-ranked workers perform their jobs. I imagine, as it’s in the television age, there’s scripting and on some level, it’s kind of creepy and perhaps even deceitful for a boss to pretend they are someone else so they can spy on their employees. This is all well and true, but perhaps at the core there’s a more generous way to look at the show.

For me, when a CEO steps into the positions that their lowest-paid workers are in, they try out their jobs and perform, and the CEO often finds that the job is unreasonable. They often find that there are alterations that need to be made for it to be humane. If the CEO came in as a CEO, they probably would not have the opportunity to see and try the job in an authentic kind of way. So, they need to step into this servant leadership, where they can get a better sense of what’s going on.

In doing so, the servant or the incognito CEO learns often how hard their employees work, how unfairly they are paid, or the struggles of holding down multiple jobs in an ever demanding economic world. At the close of the show, the CEO shares their experience with employees and often makes changes, because they were able to step into a new role and see things differently.

Again, I have no doubt it is highly scripted, but at the very core or ethical basis, there’s a fundamental truth: it is only in learning how to be a servant that we can step into leadership. It often isn’t from boardrooms where the most sociological dynamic changes happen, but rather, it’s often in warehouses, or on the streets, or in voices of children and teenagers who urge adults to make changes. If we are to step into the shoes of those who are on the fringes, what lessons of servanthood would we find that would make us stronger leaders?

1. Servanthood in Scripture

Our passage from the Gospel this morning is one that is certainly challenging. It’s often easy to rest upon the story of the mustard seed and stay there – because it’s a bit more visually dynamic and it’s been a beloved metaphor for years.

Yet, the Scripture that follows is challenging, especially in our own context as people whose notion of ‘slave’ is not too far in the past and has it’s own uncomfortable and damning sentiment. And the Scripture isn’t really helping here, at least at face value. It’s saying, the master wouldn’t invite the slave to dinner and he expects certain things of the slave and that’s how it is. The master doesn’t need to thank the slave and the slave does these things because...well, they are a slave.

On my initial read of the Scripture, I have to admit, I looked up to the sky and said, ‘Really? Really. We’re going to have to do a lot of work together God to somehow wrap this in a nice bow. Sheesh.’ In our context, do any of us have a chance of redeeming this text?

1. Study

So, I did what any good Presbyterian does – I dutifully put

my head in a book, trying to uncover some way to navigate this

text. One of the most helpful interpretations I found was from Rev. Kimberly Bracken Long, who is a retired PC(USA) minister on the Eastern Shore. She says, “The relationship between master and servant is marked by mutual accountability and expectation. The master expects the servants to perform their duties, and the servants, in turn, expect that when their work is done, they will receive nourishment and rest and protection.”

She continues, “Those who serve God do so with a sense of duty and delight, living a life according to God’s commandments – we serve God and one another, not for the bonus points, and not only because God expects it, but because God has shown us the way to abundant life.”

When I read her words, I recognized that there is a very significant difference between ‘slave’ and ‘servant.’ What we need to be incredibly careful about is that we do not use this Scripture to endorse slavery, or oppression, or marginalization of any shape or form. That, inherently, is a misappropriation of Scripture, and if anything, a sinful interpretation of the people who God has called us to be.

1. Servant

Rather, we are called to be servants, and we learn that servanthood through the perfect example of Jesus Christ who, though God incarnate, would wash the feet of his people. Servanthood is an embodiment of understanding and empathizing with those seen as ‘the least among us’ and standing alongside.

There’s a book called, ‘Journey to the East’ and it’s about this band of men who are on a mythical journey together. There is a man named Leo and he is a servant who does chores for the travelers and boosts the morale of the people around him. Those on the journey all sense Leo’s servant heart. Yet, one day, as the journey is going well, Leo all the sudden disappears. Without him, the group falls apart, the journey ends, and they just cannot continue.

And then a traveler from the group goes looking for Leo and after years of wandering, he finds Leo. He discovers that Leo, whom he had known as the servant, was actually the head of the Order who led the journey. Leo was the guiding spirit, a great and noble leader. The rest of the group just didn’t know it.

One of the morals of the story is really to know that the greatest leader you see will be seen as a servant first. The leader who embodies that servanthood spirit is the one who understands what it feels like to be in the margins, empathizes with others, and leads with a gentle and firm tenderness. Leadership can be given or taken away, but the servant heart is one that is embodied – it cannot be taken away – it is the core of someone’s very being.

1. Called as Servant

I posted a quote recently on social media, which says, “If

servanthood is below you, than leadership is beyond you.” The moment we become cocky, self-involved, seeking our own way, we forget that we are part of a larger human family and ultimately, we have one master, our Creator God. There are two challenges this week, one individual and one corporate.

The first is that I would like you to assess your leadership – where are the places in your life that you lead, and do you do that with a servant heart? Do you lead so that all may benefit and are treated fairly and respected?

The second is that I need you to be prayerful. I need you to look at our leaders today and pray for some humility and servanthood. You can read between the lines and say – the preacher must be talking about Trump. Yes, sure, I want you to pray for him, but I genuinely want your prayers to be bigger than one figurehead, I want you to pray for all of our leaders, from those in political power, to those who are CEOs, to those who lead in ways unknown to us – let us pray that they lead in a way of embodied servanthood that leads to equality, integrity, and love for all. Amen.