

High Calling, Lowly Service

Chuck Colson spent seven months in prison for his involvement in the Watergate scandal. Part of the “Watergate seven,” he was described by journalist David Plotz as the “evil genius” in the Nixon administration. Chuck came out of prison a changed man and a committed Christian who spent the rest of his life doing mission work in prisons. He died in 2012. Reflecting on his days in the Nixon White House, he said:

Of all the groups I worked with, I found religious leaders the most naïve about politics. Maybe that is because so many come from sheltered backgrounds, or perhaps it is the result of a mistaken perception of the demands of Christian charity . . . Or most worrisome of all, they may simply like to be around power. (“Why a Christian in the White House Felt Betrayed,” *Time*, October 23, 2006)

Whether or not that’s a fair assessment of modern Christian leaders, it certainly describes James and John, the sons of Zebedee. You will recall that Jesus summoned these two from their father’s fishing boat with the words “**Come, follow me, and I will teach you to fish for people.**” James and John dropped everything to follow Jesus, but somewhere along the way they let their own ambition get the best of them. Their nickname in Mark is the “Sons of Thunder.” In today’s passage they behave more like the “Sons of Entitlement.”

When God’s kingdom comes, they reason, Jesus is going to be on the throne, and by that throne will be two places of honor – one on the left and one on the right. If we don’t make our move now, two of these other disciples will beat us out. So, they polish up their sandals, slick back their hair, and walk right up to Jesus.

“Teacher,” they say, “We’ve got a small favor to ask.”

“What is it that you want from me?”

“Nothing much, really. Hardly worth mentioning. But, if it’s not too much trouble, **Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.**”

Excuse me for saying so, but James and John have been with Jesus from the outset of his public ministry. Have they not been listening at all? Did they not see Jesus put that little child in the midst of the disciples and say that they had to become like that child? Did they not hear what Jesus said to the rich man who had so many possessions? Did they not see Jesus shove the disciples aside to welcome a group of children and bless them? How could they have been with Jesus all this time and remain so clueless?

Jesus is remarkably patient with these two. He reminds them once again that he is going to Jerusalem to receive the baptism of the cross and to drink the cup of suffering. It's not about thrones and places of honor, he keeps telling them, and besides, what they're asking is not his decision to make.

The other ten disciples are not so generous. When they hear that the McZebedee brothers have made this preemptive strike, they get spitting mad. And who can blame them? If there's anything worse than a teacher's pet, it's a pair of teacher's pets. Jesus sees their murderous looks and calls a meeting with all twelve of them.

Look, he tells them. You know how the world works. The rulers lord it over the little guys and great ones push the nobodies around. "But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

With these words Jesus rewrites the manual for leaders in the church. Out goes the chapter entitled "Powerful Leadership" and in goes the chapter called "Servant Leadership." The question isn't "Who wins?" but "Who follows the example of Jesus?" Today we'd call that a "paradigm shift," and it runs against the grain of our culture. Nevertheless, that's precisely the kind of leader the church needs today.

In Presbyterian circles we have a name for this kind of "servant leader." We call them "ruling elders." What we expect of ruling elders comes straight out of the *Book of Order*:

As there were in Old Testament times elders for the government of the people, so the New Testament church provided persons with particular gifts to share in discernment of God's Spirit and governance of God's people.

Accordingly, congregations should elect person of wisdom and maturity of faith, having demonstrated skills in leadership and being compassionate in spirit. Ruling elders are so named not because they “lord it over” the congregation (Matt. 20:25), but because they are chosen by the congregation to discern and measure its fidelity to the Word of God, and to strengthen and nurture its faith and life... (G-2.03)

There you have it – the job description for servant leaders.

Did you notice there’s nothing in that description about chairing meetings, keeping minutes, or balancing budgets? That’s because the *Book of Order* assumes that, being Presbyterians, we’ll figure all that stuff out. What’s important is that elders behave as servants, not as potentates. There’s only one proper way to be an elder, and that’s Jesus style.

Back in the 1970’s, this congregation opted to combine the offices of elder and deacon. That means the ruling elders are called to be deacons, too. The *Book of Order* says:

The ministry of deacon as set forth in Scripture is one of compassion, witness, and service, sharing in the redeeming love of Jesus Christ for the poor, the hungry, the sick, the lost, the friendless, the oppressed, those burdened by unjust policies or structures, or anyone in distress . . . (G-2.0201)

Just like Jesus, elders are to serve the people, but not necessarily to give the people everything they want. Servant leadership does not mean pandering to the whims of the constituency; it means seeking the will of God while serving the people. Jesus was no less a servant leader when he was driving the money changers out of the temple than when he was healing the sick or washing his disciples’ feet. To *serve* others does not always mean to *please* others.

I can remember several occasions in the life of this congregation when the session decided to lead in a direction that they knew would be controversial. Years ago, when the elders invited homeless people to spend the night in the Education Building on the coldest winter evenings, they knew that there would be complaints – and there were. Some members left the church.

But the elders decided that their call to give special attention to the “poor, the hungry, the sick, the lost, the friendless . . .” and the oppressed wasn’t limited to members on the church roll. Out of that difficult winter the year-round Shelter of Leon County was born. Now it’s called the Kearney Center.

And when, in 2004, the session declared that we would be a Covenant Network congregation, praying and working for the full inclusion of LGBTQ members into the life and leadership of this church – the elders knew that such a declaration would not sit well with everyone. But they decided that if in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, then in Christ there is also neither gay nor straight. This is not the best strategy for building a mega church or for keeping everybody happy. But the elders decided that it is the best way to be faithful to the gospel.

Decisions like these should not be made lightly, but they cannot be avoided if Jesus is to be our model for servant leadership. His ministry and his self-giving death give the term “servant” a new definition. A servant is the least of all, but not the placater to all. The lower the service, the higher the calling.

Today the session ordains and installs a new class of elders. The very worst thing that can happen to elders is for them to think of themselves as the Board of Directors of the congregation. In that way lies disaster for the Presbyterian form of government. That is the way of bureaucracy, hierarchy, and lording it over the people. That is the way of the world, but not of the kingdom.

Instead, elders are servants, called to exercise a vital ministry within the church. From time to time they must make difficult decisions, but they must make them in service to Christ, who is the one true Head of the Church.

So, pray for Ruben, Miriam, Tristan, Sherry, Esther, Charlee, and Sarah. Pray that they will balance humility with conviction, grace with gravitas, piety with penitence. Pray that they don’t get too big for their britches or too diffident to vote their consciences. Most of all, pray that they don’t make James and John their models for ministry, but instead keep their eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.