

### **Power is not Dirty Word**

During election season, you can always count on seeing plenty of examples of hypocrisy. I heard the other day one politician criticizing the other candidate because they didn't display humility. But you'd be hard pressed to find any elected official who doesn't think rather highly of themselves. It's practically a prerequisite for the job. And it's been this way for as long as there have been politicians. According to author Robert Caro, in the mid-twentieth century, the United States Senate was a haven for power-hungry men in love with prestige. Senator Carl Hayden of Arizona, for example, was known to enter the Senate cafeteria and lay his cane on whatever table he chose to sit at for lunch. Often that chosen table would already have a clutch of secretaries or Senate staffers sitting there eating, but everyone knew that if Hayden laid his cane on your table, you had all better be gone by the time he returned with his lunch a few minutes later.

Most Senators also insisted that when they wanted the elevator in the Senate Office Building, they wanted that elevator IMMEDIATELY! To let elevator operators know that it was a Senator waiting, the Senator would buzz the elevator's call button three times. When that signal was heard, the operator was to skip all other stops (even if others already in the elevator needed a certain floor) and pick up the waiting Senator without delay. Once when Senator McCarran of Nevada heard the car pass him by after he had rung three times, he turned on his heels, stomped back to his office, called the Sergeant-at-Arms, and ordered the hapless young elevator operator fired on the spot (which he was).

But it's not just self-important politicians, most people, if they are honest, admit that they like power, they like the influence, they like the perks. It is true today and it was true in ancient Rome. People were also chasing after power, jockeying for higher position. And if you couldn't be the boss, the next best thing was to be close to him.

That is the background behind the request of James and John in this morning's Gospel lesson. They knew Jesus was on a trajectory to greatness, to power. And they wanted to be sure they could catch a lift on his coattails. "So, Jesus, we hear you got a kingdom. What d'ya think—you think we could get in on that? You know, be your right-hand (and left-hand) men? You think you could do that for us?"

You know, even in a world where we are told to look after Number One, you'd think they would have caught on that Jesus didn't operate that way. I mean, he's already explained to them back in Capernaum that "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." And he just got through telling them for the third time that he was going to be crucified. And yet, here they are acting like none of that matters and they just want to make sure they get theirs. I mean, how dense can a person be, right?

Mark doesn't say, but you can imagine Jesus letting out a big sigh before responding. "You do not know what you are asking. You still don't fully realize what glory in the kingdom entails, how very different it is from worldly notions of glory. Let me tell you this, if you want to sit by my side, then you first gotta walk with me now and stand with me when the going gets tough. Are you able to do

*that*, to go through the same ordeal that I will go through? Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" They reply, "We are able." It's doubtful even now that they appreciate what they are committing to. Because if they did, they'd know that Jesus was asking them to suffer and die for him, as Jesus will suffer and die for them. You see, sharing his cup and being baptized with the baptism with which he is baptized is about sharing in his passion, in his death. Knowing that they will in fact be martyrs, Jesus assures them, "Don't worry, James and John, both of you will get to stand by my side, to suffer as I will suffer. You'll get to share in the same "glorious" humiliation I will experience. But who will be at my right and left, that I can't give away, that'll be up to the Father."

Now, when the other disciples get wind of James and John's little power-play, they're a little peeved. Likely they had been hoping they'd get those places of honor themselves. They figured God's kingdom is like any other kingdom on earth and there are only so many corner offices, so many department chairs to give out and if they don't put their bid in now, they'll be stuck down in the mailroom. Hence, their anger at James and John. But before things get any uglier between the disciples, Jesus intervenes. He sees this as a "teachable moment," and proceeds to teach them about ambition and power.

"You know how, in the world, rulers like to lord their power over others and their great ones are tyrants. You know how they like to throw their weight around, and when people get a little power how quickly it goes to their heads. Well, that's not going to be the way it is with you. In my kingdom, the kingdom I am ushering in, whoever wants to be great must serve others. Whoever wants to be first among you must be a slave to all. That is what the Son of Man has done: He came to serve, not to be served—and then to give away his life as a ransom for many." Jesus is of course talking about himself and what his death on the cross will mean, how his life will be given in exchange for those who are being held hostage by sin and death.

Now, you'll notice that Jesus doesn't chastise the two for their ambition, their desire to be first among Jesus' disciples, misguided though it is. Nor does he say that power is always bad, or that Christians must always reject power. This would be pretty difficult anyway, as we all have a degree of power in some context or another. Contrary to how it's spoken of today, power is not just something politicians have or that the police have or that bosses have over employees. There's power at play in relationships between teachers and students, clergy and laity, doctors and patients, between bankers and borrowers, mechanics and car owners, between husbands and wives, parents and children.

You see, power is about more than the threat of physical coercion or personal harm. There's power in knowing more than someone else, power in being able to influence someone's thinking, to inspire or discourage them. There's a power that comes from being able to manipulate someone emotionally. If you've ever been guilted into doing something or held emotionally hostage by the fear of hurting someone else's feelings or being spoken ill of, you know the power of emotional coercion! We all have power over something or someone somewhere. And Jesus isn't saying that power is bad. It's how we use our power, what we do with it that matters.

Jesus is inviting his disciples not just to *re-imagine* but actually to *redefine* their understanding of power—and prestige, status, and leadership. He is showing us that power, like money, is not a tool to use for personal gain, but a gift from God, a resource that we have been entrusted with, something we have been charged to exercise good stewardship over. With whatever measure of power God has

seen fit to give us, we are to be stewards of it, to use it not for our own benefit but to for the purposes God has willed it, namely for the good of all. The power we have been given has been given to serve others.

For most of us, I suspect, we hear all this talk about “greatness found in serving” and think, well, that’s alright for Sunday school and Boy Scouts, but if anyone really behaved like that, they’d be dead meat. I mean, we learn from an early age in the school playground and in the classroom and in backyards, that if we don’t look after ourselves, no one else will. And that message is reinforced by nonstop cultural messages that tell us that glory rests in possessions, or wealth, or fame, or individual accomplishment. Why else would we pay professional athletes and movies stars millions upon millions while people like teachers and nurses get such modest wages? We pay lip service to serving others, but the fact of the matter is we have an entire culture warning us that “nice guys finish last.” So, Jesus’ idea that greatness is found in serving others, that’s a nice “ideal,” but it’s just not how things work. If someone were to try it today, they wouldn’t last a minute.

Well, that assumption has in recent years been called into question by, of all people, a businessman. In 1970, Robert Greenleaf, a former executive at AT&T turned business consultant, came to the astounding conclusion that what makes a good leader is their commitment to serving others. In an essay he wrote entitled *The servant as leader*, Greenleaf argues that legitimate leadership arises not from the exercise of power or self-interested actions, but from a fundamental desire first to help others. “The servant-leader is servant first,” he says. “It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve *first*. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. [The servant-first kind of] person is sharply different from one who is *leader* first, [the kind of person who has] the need to assuage an unusual power drive (ego) or to acquire material possessions (greed).” What makes the servant-first stand out, he says, is “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 this: 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?”

Greenleaf’s article has sold over 500,000 copies and was expanded into a book, *The Servant Leader*. Greenleaf has also founded the Center for Servant-Leadership, which seeks to apply the idea of servant-leadership in the workplace and to demonstrate its potential as a practical as well as theoretical approach to organizational management. Included among the members of the Center are between a third and a half of *Fortune* magazine’s ‘100 Best Companies to Work for in America’. You may have heard of some of these companies—Starbucks Coffee, Southwest Airlines, Men’s Wearhouse, Chik-fil-a, REI, WholeFoods and several of the nation’s top universities. They all practice servant-leadership as part of their corporate culture.

Now, it’s true that Greenleaf didn’t get his idea of servant-leadership from Jesus. But I can think of few people who have better articulated Jesus’ view of leadership and power than Greenleaf has with his description of the servant-leader. Like Jesus, Greenleaf describes the good leader as one who uses their power not to *overpower* others but to *empower* them, to help them to grow, flourish, and become the persons God desires them to be. And the fact that servant-leadership has become so popular among business leaders, educators, health care directors, and even church leaders, shows that Jesus’ understanding of power and leadership, as radical as it may seem, *can* be lived out, and lived out with great success, in the world here and now.

For being a servant, as Jesus tells us to be, isn't about being a doormat or weak or passive. It's about using the power we have to bless others, not about serving ourselves, but about serving others, not about acquiring more perks and privileges for ourselves, hoarding all the "goodies", but about leading others in a way that builds them up. You see, according to Jesus, power is not a dirty word. It's an important resource for serving others. May God grant us a servant's heart, so that we and all those whom we serve might discover what it is to be truly great. Thanks be to God!