

## ***Servant Leadership***

John 1:29-42

We shared a wonderful baptism last month when we welcomed Bryce Riggins into the community of faith. He was also playing a lead role in Bethlehem Experience that weekend. As I asked the children who the baby was to be baptized, Qing piped up, “Baby Jesus!” Indeed, we were baptizing Baby Jesus, also known as Bryce. I remarked that I had never baptized Baby Jesus before. After worship Bob Bonner noted, “That makes you John the Baptist.”

I liked that connection with John the Baptist. One of John’s lines in the gospels is a verse I have used as a mantra for many years, “He must increase, but I must decrease.” I pray that my own desires and opinions will decrease, so that the presence of Christ might increase within me. It reminds me that I am simply a vessel meant for carrying the presence of Christ.

John the Baptizer doesn’t get much press in the Gospels, and some that he does get is fairly grim, such as his beheading by Herod. Luke gives a good deal of attention to John at the beginning of his gospel, telling of the angel’s announcement of John’s birth to his parents and his mother, Elizabeth’s, relationship with Jesus’ mother, Mary. The gospels note that John had the privilege of baptizing Jesus, whom he proclaimed.

The first chapter of the Gospel of John perhaps tells us the most about John the Baptist. In the poetic prologue, John is referred to as a man sent from God who “came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light but he came to testify to the light” (John 1:6-8). John was not the light, but his role was to point others toward the light.

As we heard in the scripture reading, John recognized that Jesus ranked ahead of him; he was second rank and called to be of service to his younger cousin, the Son of God.

John the Baptist appears again in the third chapter of John’s gospel. Apparently John and Jesus are baptizing at the same time in different locations. In response to questions about his “competitor,” John celebrates the ministry of Jesus. Jesus’ success is an occasion for joy, not for complaint. John says, “The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:29-30).

John is content with second place. He gracefully steps aside and allows Jesus to come to the forefront. This is what his ministry has been all

about: preparing the way for the people to receive the Son of God, the Messiah. The time has come for John's ministry to fade and Jesus' ministry to blossom.

It must have taken a great deal of ego strength for John to gracefully step aside and to encourage his own disciples to change their loyalties and follow Jesus. It's hard for us human beings to give up the limelight, to stand aside and let another receive the glory for all the hard work we have done. John was like the stage hand who set the stage, gathered the props, invited the audience, and opened the curtains to present not himself, but Jesus. John's ministry was one of servanthood, not of mastery. John is a prime example of a disciple who truly follows Jesus. Jesus is the leader; John serves the needs of the leader and his people.

One of the leading books on the best seller lists of recent years was Jim Collins' *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...and Others Don't*. Over a period of five years Collins and his team studied several companies that made the leap from good to great for at least fifteen years. Those companies generated cumulative stock returns that beat the general stock market by an average of seven times in fifteen years. Their study yielded five key determinants of greatness. I want to lift up just one of those keys, which they call Level 5 Leadership.

Collins describes a Level 5 leaders as individuals "who blend extreme personal humility with intense professional will." They are "self-effacing individuals who display the fierce resolve to do whatever needs to be done to make the company great." They "channel their ego needs away from themselves and into the larger goal of building a great company. It's not that Level 5 leaders have no ego or self-interest. Indeed, they are incredibly ambitious—but *their ambition is first and foremost for the institution, not themselves.*"<sup>1</sup>

"Level 5 leaders are a study in duality: modest and willful, humble and fearless." Collins suggests that President Abraham Lincoln is one of the few Level 5 presidents in United States history. He "never let his ego get in the way of his primary ambition for the larger cause of an enduring great nation. Yet those who mistook Mr. Lincoln's personal modesty, shy nature, and awkward manner as signs of weakness found themselves terribly mistaken."<sup>2</sup>

From the little we know of John the Baptist, I would venture to guess that he qualifies as a Level 5 Leader. His primary ambition was not for his own riches or personal recognition. John's concern was that people know God, and so he pointed them toward Jesus, who was the fullest revelation of

God and who would point them beyond himself to God. John did not cling to his disciples for his own power or prestige. When Jesus' ministry began, John urged his disciples to follow Jesus so that they might grow in faith and develop to their fullest potential. John was a servant leader, one who sought not to serve his own needs, but rather to serve the needs and interests of others. He invested himself in arousing in others a hunger for God, in helping them recognize the need for something more in their lives. And then when One came who could feed that hunger in a far deeper way, John willingly encouraged his disciples to seize the opportunity to grow deeper by following Jesus.

Jim Collins says that "in contrast to the very *I*-centric style of other leaders, we were struck by how the good-to-great leaders *didn't* talk about themselves." The words used to describe these leaders include "quiet, humble, modest, reserved, shy, gracious, mild-mannered, self-effacing, understated, did not believe his own clippings."<sup>3</sup>

It reminds me of an anecdote from Max DePree, CEO of Herman Miller. He said, "I arrived at a local tennis club just after a group of high school students had vacated the locker room. Like chickens, they had not bothered to pick up after themselves. Without thinking too much about it, I gathered up all their towels and put them in a hamper. A friend of mine quietly watched me do this and then asked me a question that I've pondered many times over the years. 'Do you pick up towels because you're the president of a company, or are you the president because you pick up towels?'"<sup>4</sup>

Robert Greenleaf writes, "The servant-leader is servant first. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. The best test 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?"<sup>5</sup>

We all have an opportunity to exercise leadership in our places of employment, in our families, in our communities, in our friendships, in our neighborhood, and in the church. Whether we hold an official position or title, we can be leaders. Leaders are not always those who are appointed; many are elevated to leadership simply by the example they set. Considering the leadership of John the Baptist and great leaders of the twentieth century, how might we best exercise the opportunities for leadership which we are given?

A common thread is that leaders are chosen for service, not for status. Leaders are chosen not to 'lord it' over others; they are subject to a higher authority and follow that guidance in serving others. Jesus warns against using position or religion as a means of personal gain. Christians are subject to God and first and foremost will concentrate on doing what is pleasing to God.

Servant leaders also allow their own needs and interests to be subordinate to the needs and interests of others and of God. Parents often willingly and joyously make sacrifices so that the needs of their children are met. They may spend less money on themselves so that their children might experience greater opportunities for learning. As our family told stories about my mother, I recalled some of the small and big ways in which she always put the needs of her children above her own. A small way was that she always took the heel of the loaf of bread when it came to the end; we were always given a good piece of bread and never had to have just the crust. A large way that she met my needs was by going from part-time work to full-time work to pay for tuition so that I could continue at the college of my choice. Leaders have the interests of others at heart.

Leaders have a sense of humility that enables them to do what is necessary to make their company or partners or church great. They point beyond themselves to the greater good. They seek to draw out the best from others. They aspire to help others grow and reach their God-given potential. Servant-leaders in the church desire to grow into the full stature of Jesus Christ and encourage others to grow in Christ-likeness as well. We serve the church because we want people to know God, to follow Jesus Christ, and to be the people God created us to be. We further the ministry of Christ because we believe that Jesus has set us upon a direction that will enhance the well-being and life of all humankind. We tell the stories of Jesus because they have a message that people need to hear and a hope that people hunger to claim. A fringe benefit of serving others is that our needs are usually met as well. In return for our giving, we find our lives blessed with meaning and fulfillment.

On his travels, Jacob the Baker encounters an old woman along a forest path and asks for her help in navigating this unfamiliar road. She questions why he would ask an old and lonely woman for help, fearing that she has no assistance to give him.

"Fear," said Jacob, turning back to the woman, "fear makes us not only less than we might be but less than we think we are. Faith reminds us we should doubt our fears."

Jacob motioned to the path ahead of them. “Perhaps we can lean on each other for a while.”

The woman laughed out loud. “How can I be a support to you?”

“Ah, that is not so difficult,” said Jacob. “You see, the difference between a Tower of Babel and a tower of strength is the difference between those who live to make themselves more and those who know the way to heaven is in making others more.”<sup>6</sup>

Servant leaders, following in the path of John the Baptist and of Jesus Christ himself, know that the way to godliness is in serving others and in growing them to make them be all God created them to be. As Jesus leads, may we so follow in the pathways of service. Amen.

<sup>1</sup> Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...and Others Don't* (New York: HaperCollins, 2001), p. 21.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>4</sup> Max DePree, *Leadership Jazz* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 218-19.

<sup>5</sup> Robert K. Greenleaf, *The Servant as Leader*.

<sup>6</sup> Noah ben Shea, *Jacob's Journey* (New York: Villard Books, 1991), p. 37.

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