

“Do the Right Thing: Servant Leadership”

Salado UMC—Preaching Text: Mark 9:30-37

17th Sunday after Pentecost: 19 September 2021

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“Ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants.

If we continue to develop our technology without wisdom or prudence,
our servant may prove to be our executioner—Omar Bradley (1893 - 1981).

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Hear our day’s lesson:

[30] They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; [31] for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.” [32] But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

[33] Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” [34] But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. [35] He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” [36] Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, [37] “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me” (Mark 9:30-37).

In the Christian life, Jesus invites believers into a world where everything seems upside-down. In the natural world, where survival is not only a priority but the priority, an animal either eats lunch or is lunch. Biologists write of the food chain, and we human creatures sit at its pinnacle. Yet, even within the human family, there appears to be an avid need for competition, if not biological, then, at least, within the human psyche. We thrive on beating others in everything from jump rope to securing the best marriage partner. We relentlessly compare ourselves to others. As social creatures, we measure, grade, score, and evaluate every

endeavor we can think of—we even have in our sacred communities “regular prayers” and what we call “prayer warriors.”

This type of competition can get under our skin. Oversubscription to competition reminded me when I learned a painful lesson. At the end of my senior year in college, the administration announced the school’s most prestigious award. It recognized outstanding achievement in and to the university. The school awarded the coveted “M-Award” to ten faculty, staff, or students. Because I had already received other awards that year, I logically assumed that I would win an “M-Award.” In fact, other students who had won the same honors that I had won had always been recipients of the sought-after “M-Award.” There was a special section in the yearbook with the pictures of those who won.

My roommate got an early copy of the yearbook. But where my photo should have been there was the picture of Linda Chan—a Chinese student who had tutored me in Russian. A wonderful person, but winner of the coveted “M-Award”—I thought not! So, I marched my indignant, immature self over to Dean Caswell’s office. I demanded an explanation.

Dean Caswell answered me as if he knew I was coming. “David, you and Linda came right down to the wire with respect to the decision—I was in the room when the final vote was taken—and it was very close.”

“Well,” I demanded.

Dean Caswell looked me right in the eye and he said, “Well . . . you may have deserved the award, but she not only deserved it, she needed it.” Then there was a long uncomfortable silence. I walked into his office eight feet tall and full of righteous anger. I walked out six inches tall—full of shame and wanting to cry . . . because I knew he was right. Jeez, if I had thought about it, and had the standing, I would have also voted for her.

At times our spirited, gung-ho competitive nature causes us do things and act in ways that we later swallow with shame. Have you ever seen competitive parents at a T-ball game—where, by the way, not even one player cares who wins or loses?!

The world into which Jesus invites disciples like you and me is an alternative to the natural world in which we live. In this alternative world, Jesus teaches that “if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also” (Matthew 5:39). Jesus also commands us to “love your

enemies, [and] do good to those who hate you” (Luke 6:27). For those who aspire to be Christian stewards, then, Jesus’ word is: “Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again” (Luke 6:30). Today, this is utter nonsense.

Mark’s lesson concerns the stewardship of leadership. In today’s secular publishing world, books on servant leadership abound. One only needs to visit one of the on-line booksellers to verify this fact. These books offer a unique perspective on leadership today. Yet, as in Jesus’ day, servanthood-leadership is difficult to grasp.

In this section of Mark’s Gospel, Jesus has just healed a boy with an unclean spirit. Then, Jesus makes his second passion prediction (the first—Mark 8:31-33). Then, Jesus and his band of disciples move on. But, on the way, a quarrel crops up among the disciples. When arriving at Capernaum, Jesus asks, “What were you arguing about on the way?” Jesus’ question meets with silence. The disciples feel shame because after Jesus speaks of his death, they argue about “who was the greatest.”

Sometimes, in the Gospels, Jesus senses conversations without in fact hearing the words (see: Mark 2:8; Luke 5:22). We readers expect a rebuke. Instead, Jesus offers a life lesson. First, Jesus tells the 12: “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Second, Jesus simply takes a child and suggests that hospitality toward these little ones is hospitality extended to him. Moreover, one who welcomes a child welcomes the one who sent Jesus in the first place—namely God. Fundamentally, it is a similar lesson Jesus teaches in the parable of “the sheep and goats” (Matthew 25). In the first century children dwelt at the bottom of the social order. Even today, children remain the most at risk in nature’s hierarchy. How disciples or stewards treat the lowly and helpless is a measure of obedience to God in Christ.

In the upside-down gospel world, in order to be great, one must serve others—whether great or small. It is a difficult teaching because we are not “built that way.” We strive to succeed. We struggle to survive and triumph. Yet, in God’s created world, we are “to be in love and charity with our neighbors.” As Jesus teaches, a neighbor is the one in need. We are neighbors—and great in God’s Realm—when we show mercy (see: Luke 10:37). Good stewards of leadership are ones who reveal a servant’s heart.

“How can I be a better steward?” folks may ask. I would suggest the best way to be a steward is by offering what we can do instead of offering what we cannot.

In other words, sometimes people do work; sometimes people give money for resources so others can work. One can either be a servant in service or do a service of enabling. Examples that come to mind are the brilliant ministries we call “Family Promise” or “Thanksgiving on I-35.” We will need workers to help set up, cook, and do other kinds of service work.

Believe me, there are hundreds of ways to be a steward and hundreds of ministries you can help fund. Do the right thing and remember that “many hands lighten the load.”

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