

**19th SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**  
**September 30, 2018**

Text: Numbers 11 and Mark 9:38-50

Theme: Servant Leaders

At the 2019 Synod Assembly we will elect a new bishop. Our current bishop is retiring so that means we will spend two full days discerning who will serve in his place. Meetings are already being held to determine what skills and gifts will be needed in our next leader. In more private settings the names of pastors are being discussed. For those of you who are not familiar with how our church functions this whole election process is a very big deal. We certainly want our next bishop to lead with integrity and to move us forward in our mission. He/she will also represent us in conversations with other church bodies. We need and want to choose wisely.

In the church we seek servant leaders. It is a term we use for those who follow the example of Jesus Christ. It is also a term that was coined in 1970 by a man named Robert Greenleaf after he read *Journey to the East* by Hermann Hesse, a German novelist.

In the story a group of travelers went on this pilgrimage to the East in search of the ultimate truth. One of the men in the group (named Leo) seemed to have this uncanny ability to always know what someone in the group needed and he was able to supply it immediately. He was a very kind and helpful man until one day he suddenly disappeared. Nobody could explain his disappearance and eventually the group fell apart and abandoned the rest of their journey. Several years later, one of the travelers (still plagued by Leo's disappearance) decided to start searching for him. When he eventually found him, Leo was no longer a servant but had become the president of a special Order.

There is much more to the story than I have shared but it was the main character that helped Greenleaf to develop his concept of a servant leader. Greenleaf saw in Leo a man who took every opportunity to practice nurturing and developing his natural God-given abilities to serve. Then when Leo was called upon to lead he was better able to make that conscious decision.

Serve first and then lead (not the other way around). It stands in sharp contrast to those who are always seeking to be in leadership positions because they are driven by their own desire for power and prestige and selfish ambition. Last week in our reading from James these were the very things we were told to avoid.

Like Greenleaf, I am personally drawn to books and/or articles that have anything to do with developing good and solid leadership skills. I look for new insights on how to be a better servant leader and how I can be a better person. It also helps me discern what I seek in others who are (or want to be) in leadership roles.

From my own research I know that three names consistently appear on the list of famous servant leaders and they are Martin Luther King, Jr., Eleanor Roosevelt, and Nelson Mandela. All 3 spent their adult lives using their God-given abilities to heal fragile relationships and bring together whole communities. They had inclusive visions and took bold actions even when faced with great adversity or danger. ‘

Once I read about such people and digest all of their wise insights, I then search the Scriptures to find passages that reflect similar ideas and thoughts. I write them down on some index cards and place them in strategic places so that when I open my Bible (there they are) or when I open another book I reference frequently there they are to read over and over again.

For a model of strength I turn to Ephesians 6:  
Render service with enthusiasm.

Whatever good we do, we will receive the same from the Lord.  
Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power.

For compassionate service I turn to Galatians 6:  
Bear the burdens of one another.  
Let us not grow weary in doing what is right.

And for decision making I turn to the words of Jesus in John 5:  
I can do nothing on my own.  
I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me.

And I have one more card that is not from Scripture.  
It was used by a leader of the French Revolution and reads –  
*There go my people. I must follow them for I am their leader.*

I know I need to model strength when others struggle. I know that it takes practice to show love and compassion to all people. And when it comes to making decisions, I know it can be a pretty complex issue and that is when I especially cry out for the wisdom of God. And I have learned it is okay to stay in the back for all those who are eager to move forward.

But is this not true for all of us ... no matter our age or vocation or calling? We are all given the natural God-given ability to serve. And as that gift is nurtured and developed God will call upon us to lead. It might be to serve as a teacher or a faith formation mentor, an attorney or government worker, a spouse or parent or friend. It is what I love about God because whether we know it or not (whether we like it or not) we will be put in leadership roles by a God who is less concerned about our credentials and our identity but is all about what we will do when the Spirit lands on us.

We may be called upon to stand by the side of our loved ones to sort through options that may or may not have easy answers. We may be called upon to offer words of hope in challenging times. We need to practice our life of service so we will be ready to make a conscious decision when called upon to lead.

In the Old Testament lesson we encounter Moses (a well-known leader) but let us do not miss Eldad and Medad. They were standing off to the side but also received the Spirit of the Lord along with the other 70 elders. We have no idea why they did not join the others in the tent of meeting. Maybe they did not feel qualified for the job or they just did not understand the process. But no matter the reason the Spirit came upon them and they prophesied much to the chagrin of those who followed the rules.

And we see the same thing take place in the gospel reading. We encounter the disciple, John, (another well-known leader) but do not miss the exorcist who stood and cast out demons in the name of Jesus Christ. As John pointed out this man was not part of the inner circle but Jesus made it clear that this man was doing the work of the Kingdom.

At the 2019 Synod Assembly all the voting members will use their collective wisdom to seek a servant leader and call him/her as our next bishop. We will pray for the Spirit to come upon that person so that he/she can lead with integrity. In the meanwhile, we should all practice a life of service so that when the Spirit touches us we (too) will be able to make a conscious decision to lead for whatever God has in store for us. Amen