

Leadership With a Difference

Text: Joel 2: 28; Mark 10:43-44

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

...I will pour out my spirit on all humankind; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams and your young men see visions. Joel 2:28

...whoever wants to be great must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be the willing slave of all. Mark 10:43-44

I haven't had any of the Consistory newly organized last week come up to me and ask to sit on my right hand or on my left. No, there's not too much problem in the Church with people aspiring to leadership openly, and maybe the problem that James and John had with which they confronted Jesus is a problem of a former day. Yet, I hardly think so. Leadership in the Church of Jesus Christ is leadership with a difference. It is leadership that is characterized by *power to* rather than *power over*. It's just the difference in the preposition. In fact, it's the difference *between*, but it's all the difference in the world, the world and the Kingdom of God.

Leadership in the Kingdom of God is the power to enable others to find the highest fulfillment in their human existence. It is the power to give one's life on behalf of another; it is to give one's life and gifts and energies for that greater goal for the Kingdom of God. It is the opposite of worldly power, which is *power over*, the power by which one dominates another, the power by which one climbs the ladder of success, the power often characterized by blind ambition.

Leadership in the Church is a tricky business, because it walks that tightrope between the energy and the vision that is necessary in order that the Church may move forward, and a dominating kind of authority and power that enforces will on another or on an institution for personal ends and according to personal prerogatives. Leadership in the Church is a tricky business, because it is always steering its way between those two possibilities.

What is true for the leaders of the Church is really true for all of us in the posture of our Christian lives, for we are really all called to leadership in the world to the extent that we are all called to be the servants of Jesus Christ in the world, and therefore we are all called to exercise the power to rather than the power over.

James and John came to Jesus and asked for the positions of privilege in the coming Kingdom of glory. They said, in effect, "Jesus, when you become number one, we would like to be numbers two and three." If you look at this little incident and trace it in the other Gospels, you will find that in Luke's Gospel it is set at the Last Supper. Even in Mark's Gospel there is the announcement of the forthcoming passion. One can see that the Gospel writers had a literary sense by which to enforce their point; here you have Jesus beginning to feel the weight of the Cross, which was the consequence of the way of his life, that inevitable end because of the manner of his living, reaching out to them, beginning to share that burden with them, breaking bread with them. In that context, James and John ask, "Could we have the places of privilege in your forthcoming Kingdom?" Talk about a lack of sensitivity. Talk about inappropriateness. They didn't even hear Jesus. They had no sense for what he was beginning to undergo. They had no understanding whatsoever about the news that he was breaking to them. In the context in which he announces his own passion and his forthcoming death, they want to sit on his right hand and on his left!

And boy, were the rest of the Consistory members ticked with that! Of course, the reason they were ticked was that James and John got in line first. If you read the ninth chapter of Mark's Gospel, you will find that as "they were going along the way, they were all talking about who would be greatest among them." Mark shows us the dullness, the misunderstanding, the ignorance of the disciples throughout his Gospel, and there is probably no place at which they appeared more insensitive, or their response was more inappropriate than at this moment. Jesus just said to them, "Look, what I am about is not what you are about in every other relationship, every other connection, every other involvement in an institution in your life. What I am about is service." The model he set forth was his own life. The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many.

Leadership in the Kingdom is leadership with a difference. It is the power to give one's life away; it is the opportunity to lay down one's life in the service of the Kingdom of God in the name of Jesus Christ on behalf of one's brothers and sisters. It's no wonder we're confused in the Church because, especially we, who have imbibed into the pores of our being the American way, we who respond so strongly to the call to self-realization and who treasure the freedom to become whatever may enter our minds to become, find it so jolting to run up against the characterization of leadership in the Kingdom of God.

Of course, one can be just as bad on the other side. One can be a martyr, an insipid, passive nobody who doesn't assert his will or her desire or her gifts at all, and then the Church is also at a dead standstill.

There was a day in the Church in which people were brought into office on the basis of their piety, and I would submit to you that piety is one good consideration, but it's not everything. There was a time in this congregation many years ago, a hundred or so, when I was first here, when you could predict who would be elected to the office of Deacon, which was that lowly office by which you moved up to the office of Elder. The way you did it was to move out of teaching Sunday School to becoming the Superintendent of the Sunday School, and then you had also to start coming to the evening worship and if you wanted to be a shoo-in, you came to midweek prayer meeting, and if you wanted to make it *this* Fall, you even prayed out loud! Now, I submit to you that those are all fine qualities, and piety is important. Christian life and faith are critical. But the Church for too long was long on piety and short on leadership with energy, with vitality, with vision.

There is nothing wrong in the Church with those who have a vision. The men of Issachar, one of the Northern tribes of Israel, feeling that union with David over all of Israel was the direction Israel must go, are characterized in the Book of Chronicles as people who had an understanding of their times and knew what Israel had to do. The Church is still too much characterized by leadership without vision, without a knowledge of the world and therefore without a knowledge of what the Church ought to be doing. I said to one of the most visionary young men of this community yesterday, "I'd like to sit down with you and ask you what we ought to be doing in terms of what this community is becoming." He looked at me like, "What do you mean? The Church never gets in where the action is." He's right! We've always come kicking and screaming into the Kingdom, always the guardians of the rear action, the conservative bastion of everything that is obsolete. There's nothing wrong with vision, energy, vitality, and a passion for the Kingdom of God. But, it needs always to be a passion for the Kingdom of God.

Joel, the Old Testament prophet, said there's going to come a day when the Spirit will be poured out on your sons and your daughters, and your old men will see visions and your young men will dream dreams. It's not incidental that visions and dreams are lifted up as that which is to characterize the leadership of the people of God in the world, for what we are about, people, is not something that can be shaped up in worldly-wise terms, according to some rational formula of success.

What we are, as the people of God, is a people that must be open to the Spirit of God so that, somehow or other, in a dream or in a vision, the truth may grip us and we may be thereby energized to realize that dream and to become the concretization of the Kingdom of God in the midst of the world - a world that is characterized by blind ambition and ruthless rise to power. There we must be as

passionate, as urgent, as farseeing, as devoted and as committed leadership, always before the face of God, always in the service of Jesus, always knowing that there is involved in leadership a cross, a dying, a suffering, but always knowing, also, that beyond the cross there is the glory of that Kingdom that shall not fail.

We are involved as a people of God in the most exciting, absolutely the most important, the most remarkable movement on the face of the earth. So, my dear friends, Elders and Deacons, pastors and all God's people - let us lead with energy, with a vision borne of the Spirit, with total commitment, not to overpower, not to impose our fancy on another, but with a power to give our lives away to the glory of Jesus. Amen.