

Leading by Serving

Tim Holman was a bright student with an engaging personality who was popular with both students and staff at his school. In the elementary grades, he was often found helping those who were struggling with math or language arts. In high school, he was the president of the student council, always willing to hear and respond to ideas that came forward at meetings.

Not surprisingly as a law student, Tim specialized in family practice. He wanted to help families sort through marital, estate and personal legal issues so that as many could benefit as possible from the outcome. He ran for alderman on the city council and became known for his wisdom and fairness in dealing with a variety of local programs for the homeless and disadvantaged, especially if they involved children. People even encouraged him to go further in politics and run for the legislative assembly. Perhaps he could continue his work on a larger scale. Not that he was unaware of the problems that trap many who venture into the public service, but he was confident that his focus would remain on the reasons he enjoyed working as he did – to better peoples' lives.

Tim Holman is a good example of what Jesus was talking about in our gospel reading this morning. The subject of leadership needed to be discussed among the disciples, as they would soon become the leading figures to oversee the growth of the Christian church in the decades to follow. How they would go about this was important to Jesus, as he would introduce a completely different way than that of the world around them. Even today, his teaching is as relevant as in the first century, as leadership is still based on the principles that prompted James and John to approach Jesus with their request. Let's look into what true leadership is and isn't, and why God feels so strongly that we must learn to distinguish between them.

1) What true leadership isn't

“Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came over and spoke to [Jesus]. ‘Teacher,’ they said, ‘we want you to do us a favor.’ ‘What is it?’ he asked. ‘In your glorious Kingdom, we want to sit in places of honor next to you,’ they said, ‘one at your right and the other at your left.’” (Mark 10:35-37) Jesus didn’t scold them for this request, rather used it as a teaching moment to first explain what true leadership *isn’t*.

“So Jesus called them together and said, ‘You know that in this world kings are tyrants, and officials lord it over the people beneath them.’” (v.42) This world honors the ambitious who exercise of power and control, who seek prestige and special privileges for themselves. However, the dark side of ambition is greed that’s in the background of all leaders who use their power to oppress and subjugate those below them. There are many examples of this in nations that grapple with leaders who use their country’s wealth for personal gain rather than addressing the needs of their people. Movie stars and sports heroes also lead by example, often unfortunate in lifestyles of abuse and addiction. Corporate leaders get rich by increasing short-term profits at the expense of laid-off employees. Politicians frequently sell out to special groups and spend their careers shading the truth to protect personal interests. Jesus wanted his followers to stay away from all kinds of corruption, as ultimately, they lead to brokenness and death.

Kenneth Lay was founder and CEO of Enron, a high-tech corporation on the cutting edge. He persuaded many to invest in stocks that was felt would bring fantastic returns. But unknown to them, Kenneth and his executives were ‘cooking the books’, falsifying reports so as to exaggerate earnings. Towards the end, Lay sold off most of his stock while convincing others to continue buying more. When the company folded, he walked away with millions of dollars, while everyone else lost everything. Kenneth was convicted on ten counts of fraud and

conspiracy, but just before sentencing to prison, he died of a heart attack. All his misplaced ambition got him nowhere while hurting others along the way.

2) What true leadership is

Not that ambition is a bad thing. Ambition is the force within us that compels us to strive to reach our God-given potential. It's what motivates us to get up in the morning and want to do our best. It stirs a hunger within us for recognition and reward, to savor the goodness of life, to prove our ability and accomplish great goals. It fosters the pursuit of excellence that will stay with us for a lifetime.

Ana Rogales lived in Mexico in the poorest conditions possible: a one-room house with a dirt floor, no electricity or running water, and an abusive father. Eventually, she and her mother left and traveled north to Texas where they were given refuge by a church. A decent home was found, as was a school where Ana could learn English and start a successful academic career: graduating at the top of her class, completing her undergraduate work in three years and a Master of Divinity at the state seminary, with the goal of a doctorate from Princeton University. She plans to help other immigrant families as a local church and community leader, possibly entering politics to oversee important social programs.

Jesus focused on service as the badge of true leadership. "Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be the slave of all." (Mark 10:43-44) The Greek words *diakonos* (a servant, usually a hired worker) and *doulos* (a slave) in the ancient world usually meant a powerless, poor person without resources or even intelligence who did the bidding of the master.

That's not what Jesus had in mind, as he himself identified as a servant. "For even I, the Son of Man, came here not to be served, but to serve others, and to give my life as a ransom for

many.” (v.45) Jesus was the ‘Word-made-flesh’, creator of the universe in whom everything exists. It was he who spoke to Job the words we heard in our Old Testament reading, “Who is this that questions my wisdom with such ignorant words? Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you know so much. Do you know how its dimensions were determined and who did the surveying?” (Job 38:2,4-5) This divine Son of Man gave up his awesome power to dwell on earth, serving the will of God. As the apostle Paul wrote, “Your attitude should be the same that Christ Jesus had. Though he was God, he did not demand and cling to his rights as God. He made himself nothing, he took the humble position of a slave and appeared in human form. And in human form he obediently humbled himself even further by dying a criminal’s death on a cross.” (Philippians 2:5-8) As a servant-leader, Jesus certainly didn’t lack power, or was poor, without resources or intelligence. Neither are we.

3) What a servant-leader looks like

- a servant-leader empowers others. A lay leader was considering entering the ministry as a vocation. Her pastor wanted to provide an opportunity to preach, so he willingly took himself out of his own pulpit and invited the student to preach on several occasions before entering seminary. Although very popular with his parishioners and an outstanding preacher, he didn’t feel it was necessary to ‘prove himself’ by selfishly clinging exclusively to his teaching role, but allowing someone else to ‘test the waters’. In this way, another ministerial career was launched.
- a servant-leader works behind the scenes rather than desire the limelight. Jesus knew it would be difficult for him to move freely around in public to preach the Good News, so he cautioned those he healed to remain quiet. As when a man with leprosy was made well, “Then Jesus sent him on his way and told him sternly, ‘Go right over to the priest and let him examine you. Don’t talk to anyone along the way. Take along the offering required in the law of Moses for those who

have been healed of leprosy, so everyone will have proof of your healing.” (Mark 1:43-44) Not the words of someone who sought the adulation of the crowds, but to do God’s will.

-a servant-leader’s road involves dedication and sacrifice. Jesus probed the depths of James’ and John’s commitment to following in his footsteps, “Are you able to drink from the bitter cup of sorrow I am about to drink? Are you able to be baptized with the baptism of suffering I must be baptized with?” (Mark 10:38) How willing are we to do the same in service to God and others?

- a servant-leader’s greatest ability is to generate love in others. At a track meet for special kids – those physically and mentally challenged - the final event was a quarter mile race. The contestants lined up, the starting pistol sounded, and they were off. Everything went well until the final turn. Then one of the contestants stumbled and fell. As soon as the others realized what had happened, they turned and came back to the fallen runner and helped him to his feet. Then, arm in arm, they limped together toward the finish line. As the herd of runners passed in front of the crowd, everyone stood to cheer them on. No one cared to notice who actually crossed the finish line first. What mattered was that they all finished – every last one of them completed the race – and no one was left behind.

In the final analysis, the distinguishing mark of a true leader and of Christian maturity is when our ambitions turn from satisfying our own needs and wants to attending to the needs of others. And when that happens, we become focused on something far bigger than ourselves – the Kingdom of God – and our greatest joy comes in doing good for others. No wonder the Psalmist proclaimed, “Praise the Lord, I tell myself; O Lord my God, how great you are!” (Psalm 104:1a) Amen.

