



SERVANT LEADERSHIP

SERIES: HOW WE FUNCTION – FOUR KEY VALUES

Catalog No. 7211
 Luke 22:14-27
 Fourth Message
 Gary Vanderet
 July 4th, 2004

This morning we complete a series in which we are looking at four core values that shape our philosophy of ministry here at PBCC. Our final message will deal with how a church is to be led. Thinking about church leadership, I am reminded of a humorous story I heard some years ago. The telephone rang in a church office and the caller asked the secretary, "Who is the head hog at the trough?" "I beg your pardon!" the secretary snapped. "We would never refer to Reverend Smith in those terms." The caller said, "I don't care what you call him. I have a \$10,000 check for the church and I want to talk to the head hog at the trough." "Oh," she replied, "here comes that big pig now!"

Our text comes from the gospel of Luke, the 22nd chapter. It is a lengthy passage, but I will spend most of our time on a couple of verses, Jesus' exhortation to his disciples in verses 25 and 26. This takes place on the Lord's final evening here on earth. I could have chosen a number of different passages, but this one will prepare us to share the Lord's Table later in the service.

And when the hour had come He reclined at the table, and the apostles with Him. And He said to them, "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I say to you, I shall never again eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He said, "Take this and share it among yourselves; for I say to you, I will not drink of the fruit of the vine from now on until the kingdom of God comes." And when He had taken some bread and given thanks, He broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me." And in the same way He took the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood. But behold, the hand of the one betraying Me is with Me on the table. For indeed, the Son of Man is going as it has been determined; but woe to that man by whom He is betrayed!" And they began to discuss among themselves which one of them it might be who was going to do this thing.

And there arose also a dispute among them as to which one of them was regarded to be greatest. And He said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who have authority over them are called 'Benefactors.' But not so with you, but let him who is the greatest among you become as the

youngest, and the leader as the servant. For who is greater, the one who reclines at the table, or the one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at the table? But I am among you as the one who serves." (Luke 22:14-27 NASB)

These verses describe the scene which we commonly refer to as the Last Supper. Now forget Leonardo da Vinci's famous painting of this event. Leonardo was a gifted artist, but his theology in this work leaves a little to be desired. Everyone is sitting in straight-backed chairs, all on the same side of the table. I have a friend who says that whenever he sees that painting he imagines Jesus saying to the disciples, "Everyone who wants to be in the picture get on this side of the table." But that is not how the disciples sat when they dined. They arranged themselves around a low table, probably shaped in a "U," and reclined on their left elbows, with their feet sticking out diagonally from the table.

A second misconception obvious in Leonardo's painting is the angelic look on the disciples' faces as they gaze at Jesus. But if we read this account alongside John's version in John 13, we find a different perspective. Luke says that during the meal an argument arose over position and status. Remember this was the occasion when our Lord washed the disciples' feet, as described by John in his gospel.

It's important to understand the custom of this period. People bathed at the Roman baths, which had hot and cold running water, saunas and other comforts. Before going for a meal in someone's home they would visit these baths in order to bathe. Then they walked to their destination in sandaled feet, on unpaved, dirt roads. Upon their arrival, a servant would wash their feet.

On this particular occasion in the Upper Room there was no slave to wash feet. It's no wonder. The disciples were playing, "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the greatest of us all?" There was no angelic look on their faces. Try to picture instead the scene as 24 dirty feet and an argument. It's hard to imagine. The Lord is just hours from the cross. He is spending his last precious moments with the men to whom he is going to entrust his kingdom, and he is faced with 24 dirty feet and an argument. How does one respond in that situation?

In the middle of dinner, Jesus took off his outer garment, a robe that reached to his feet, and then his inner

robe, a long tunic. Dressed only in a short undergarment that reached down to his knees, the garb of a slave, he crawled around with a bowl of water and washed the disciples' feet. A rabbi (the word means "high one, exalted one, great one") just didn't do that sort of thing. For Jesus to get down on his hands and knees was shocking. Then he shared some truth with those men he loved so much. These are the words we will focus on. He said to them: "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who have authority over them are called 'Benefactors' [people who want to get credit for everything they've done]. But not so with you, but let him who is the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as the servant."

The model for leadership in Jesus' day, as it is in ours, was the corporate model: bossing, patronizing, commanding, controlling, and expecting gratitude for the slightest acts of kindness. How different was our Lord. His manner was lowly. His symbol was a slave, down on his knees with a towel and a wash basin. Though he had all authority in heaven and earth he never pulled rank or insisted on his own way. Paul says that he emptied himself, taking on the form of a bond-servant. Though he was God he set aside those rights to act independently as God and became dependent on the Father in the same way that we must do.

Jesus' leadership was not lordship but servanthood. He preferred others and deferred to their needs. He didn't storm around Palestine saying, "I want to be treated like God. I want to be served. I want to be understood." He made himself a servant. His whole life was an expression of that servant attitude. He told his disciples, "[I] did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give [my] life as a ransom for many" (Matt 20:28; Mark 10:45). He was always serving. That was the major characteristic of his life: cooking meals for his disciples and washing their filthy feet.

Jesus' model of authority and leadership wasn't a slight alteration of secular leadership, but a completely different nature. That's what he was telling his disciples. In his kingdom an entirely different system of government would prevail than that employed by the world. It isn't derived from the same source; it isn't exercised in the same way. Jesus said that in the world, people "lord it over" each other. The world's view of authority places men over one another, as in a military command structure or a business executive hierarchy. Webster's defines authority as the "right to require obedience, the power to enforce rules and give orders." This is as it should be. Because of the competitiveness created by the fall, and the rebelliousness and ruthlessness of sinful human nature, the world could not function without the use of command structures and executive decision.

But as Jesus states very clearly here and on other occasions, "But not so with you." Authority in the church

differs from authority in the world. We aren't any greater than our Master. Our leadership must reflect his. The measure of our authority in ministry is not how many people we are over, but how many we are under. If we want to lead in God's kingdom, then we have to get off our pedestals and give up our power trips. We have to be like Jesus and get down on our knees. Servant leadership means just that: being lower than all, washing feet. It means preferring others, furthering their causes, seeking their good, encouraging their growth, bearing their faults, being gentle and humble; doing for others what God himself has done for us. Jesus' call to leadership is a call to humility, to dying to ourselves and serving others.

In seminary, one of my professors said something that has stayed with me all these years. I haven't always practiced it, but I have never forgotten it. He said, "Don't worry about the breadth of your ministry. You concern yourself with the depth of your life and God will take care of the breadth of your ministry." Looking back, I have to say that I have spent much too much time worrying about gaining influence instead of developing character. Underneath that desire for influence lay personal ambition, a craving for importance, a desire to be thought of as a mature spiritual leader, and very little brokenness and humility.

But in God's kingdom, authority comes from a life, not an office. Leaders earn the right to be heard in people's lives. The apostle Peter learned that truth through failure and brokenness. The same Peter who found it so difficult to allow Jesus to wash his feet, wrote in his first epistle, "To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder...Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care...not because you must, but because you are willing...not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock" (1 Pet 5:1-3 NIV).

Authority as leaders or elders does not reside in titles, training, experience or background, but in obedience to the truth and genuine love for others. Servant leaders lead by example, by persuasion, by reason, by proclamation of the word, not ultimatums and commands. They must not dictate and demand, but model and declare. If they are growing in grace, and faithfully using their gifts, then they will be influencing others toward God whether they know it or not. And influencing others toward God is what real authority is all about.

Many of you have never had the privilege of knowing Ray Stedman, the founding pastor of our mother church, PBC in Palo Alto. Ray was a most unpretentious man. He was one of the best known and influential pastors in the world, but if you attended PBC while he was alive, you wouldn't be able to pick him out of the crowd. If he wasn't preaching he'd be sitting in a pew, dressed modestly, with his Bible open, ready to learn.

He never took himself too seriously and never could understand leaders who did.

Jesus told his disciples, “you have only one Master and you are all brothers” (Matt 23:8 NIV). The church has virtually ignored those words. We have borrowed the world’s understanding of authority. We have changed the titles; instead of kings and generals we have popes and bishops. But we still go on our way, lording it over people, forgetting the servanthood that Jesus modeled. Even in our homes we have borrowed the world’s authority structure and given it a new name: God’s chain of command.

The basic idea of church government in the Scriptures is founded on this truth of the Headship of Christ. Just as our bodies are governed by our heads—and our hands and feet and all the other elements of our bodies never move except by the command of the head—so the church is a living organism, a body that is not to move except by direct command of the Head, and Christ is the Head.

The church is an organism, not an organization. Many churches operate as if Jesus is far away in heaven and he has left it up to leaders to run his church. But he said he would never leave us or forsake us. He is right here in our midst, “wherever two or three are gathered.” Therefore, the basic function of church government is to make room for the ministry and leadership of Christ as the Head of the church, through the Holy Spirit.

None of us is the head. We are a family, a very close-knit family of brothers and sisters. That reality saturates the New Testament. The terms brethren, brother and sister occur over 250 times in the NT. Since the church is a family, a community of brothers and sisters who have only one Master, how is it to be led? As it doesn’t need priests, clerics, lords, or any hierarchical structure, the leaders of the early Christian community were appropriately called elders. The term conveys the idea of maturity, knowledge, experience and wisdom. An elder is not necessarily older in years, but he is mature. He isn’t a new convert. In a family who are all saints in Christ, those who are respected because of their wisdom and experience would naturally lead the community.

Two other terms are used in the NT to describe leaders. One is “overseer,” which describes the leader’s function: to give oversight and care. The other term “pastor-teacher” describes the duties of a leader, which is to shepherd the sheep and see that they are fed from the Scriptures. These terms appear to be used interchangeably in the New Testament. The character qualities of an elder are found in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. Certainly elders are not perfect men, but they are broken men. They understand the New Covenant. They understand grace, and a life of divine enablement rather than human achievement. They understand servant au-

thority. They know what it means to love.

It’s also clear that there was never just one elder in any given church. When the NT talks about church leadership it is always plural, never singular. Singular leadership in a church is always dangerous. The New Testament warns against it. The apostle John made mention of Diotrephes, who loved to be first (3 John 1:9). He liked being the head honcho, calling all the shots. Multiple leadership is the norm.

In the NT, these men were appointed by the apostles, but Scripture clearly indicates that it is God who makes someone an elder. In Acts we read of Paul calling the elders of the church at Ephesus together and telling them, “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood” (Acts 20:28 NASB). The apostles had appointed these men to office, but Paul says they had first determined that they were chosen of the Holy Ghost. In reality, they had been gifted and appointed by God. The apostles were simply recognizing what God had already done.

Currently there are nine elders who shepherd this body. You may not know them all, so I am going to ask them to come up and introduce themselves. Since we believe that Jesus is still the Lord of his church, it is not the function of the elders to make decisions based on what they think is best, but to discern the mind of Christ on any given issue. We have found that the best way to do that is by acting in unanimity, so all of our decisions are unanimous.

Elders are appointed by other elders. But we believe that God makes a man an elder, so we are constantly looking for men whom God has gifted and who are serving in this way. It is clear in Scripture that the sheep never choose their shepherd. That is always the job of the Chief Shepherd.

Elders are appointed for life. Nowhere in Scripture is a term of office mentioned. The only thing that was ever brought into question was their fitness to serve on the basis of their conduct, or the fact that they had moved away or were otherwise incapacitated.

The principles of humility and servanthood lie at the very heart of Christ’s teaching. Unfortunately, we have been slow to understand these great virtues and their application to church leadership. Worldly patterns of power, authority and rule are easily perpetuated and hard to break.

I would like to close by sharing a prayer that was customarily said by Merry Cardinal del Val (1865-1930) after he had celebrated Mass:

The Litany of Humility

From the desire of being esteemed,
From the desire of being loved,
From the desire of being extolled,
From the desire of being honored,
From the desire of being praised,
From the desire of being preferred to others,
From the desire of being consulted,
From the desire of being approved,
From the fear of being humiliated,
From the fear of being despised,
From the fear of suffering rebuke,
From the fear of being falsely accused,
From the fear of being forgotten,
From the fear being ridiculed,
From the fear of being wronged,
From the fear of being suspected;
Deliver me Jesus,
That others may be loved more than I,
That others may be esteemed more than I,
That in the opinion of the world
 others may increase and I may decrease,
That others may be chosen and I set aside,
That others may be praised and I unnoticed,
That others may be preferred before me in every-
 thing,
That others become holier than I,
 provided that I may become as holy as I should.
Jesus grant me the grace to desire it.

© 2004 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino