

SERVANT LEADERSHIP

Luke 22:24-27

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The writers of the gospel stories evidently did not try very hard to make the disciples look good. Rather, throughout the gospels, the disciples appear very human. Sometimes they seem petty, arguing about which one is Jesus' favorite. Frequently, they don't seem to understand what Jesus is all about. We've just finished the Holy Week stories, remembering that Peter denied three times that he even knew Jesus. Our story for today may be one of the worst, also because of its timing. It's Thursday night of Holy Week. The disciples are eating the Passover meal with Jesus, and he's just told them he knows that one of them will betray him. First the disciples began arguing about who could possibly do such a thing; that part seems natural. But then they immediately shift and begin arguing about which one of them is the greatest. This is the argument Jesus hears from some of his best friends less than 24 hours before his death.

He puts an end to the argument this way: "the greatest among you must become like a person of lower status and the leader like a servant. So which one is greater, the one who is seated at the table or the one who serves at the table? Isn't it the one who is seated at the table? But I am among you as one who serves."

Jesus' words can't come as a big surprise to the disciples, not if they've been paying attention at all. His message is consistent. He's told them before that the last shall be first and the first shall be last. Jesus turned the world upside down with his ministry. He didn't just say it; he lived it. He valued the widows and the orphans, the lost and the left out. He touched the untouchables, healed those who were not even welcome in the

Temple, and invited tax collectors and other notorious sinners to share a meal with him.

Throughout his ministry he upended expectations.

He embodied a spirit of humility, never looking for the limelight but in everything he did or said he called attention to the one who sent him.

He was a leader, I would say the greatest of all time, but he led not by ego but by love. He was not looking for accolades or attention, just followers who would love as he loved. "I am among you as one who serves."

"Who's best? Who's richest? Who's strongest? Who's number one?" We are still obsessed with these questions. Top Ten Lists are more popular than ever. We idolize athletes, not for their work ethic, but because of their money and power. We want to look and dress like the latest celebrity du jour. We are so enamored by prestige that some celebrities themselves are being prosecuted for trying to cheat their children's way into big-name colleges.

Jesus shows us that true greatness is determined not by economic or social status but by qualities like honor, truthfulness and faithfulness. True greatness is born out of love. True greatness is humble.

One author puts it this way. Jesus is inviting people into God's realm, where priorities are clear. The focus in God's realm is not how many toys people have, but where their hearts are. Our participation in God's realm is not about things, but about God's vision for all creation. In God's community, people look out for each other and share what they have; people take what they need and leave some for others. In God's community, people think about their neighbors, even as they think about themselves.

Today we celebrate a place where humility is found, where neighbors are served, a place where servant's hearts are at work every day...and have been for 40 years.

Servant leadership is the ability to bring out the best in another person, valuing each person's individuality. Servant leadership is practiced at the Good Neighbor Thrift Shop.

Whereas our society sometimes rewards leaders who demean people, servant leaders seek to built others up. Sometimes leaders rise to the top by climbing over others, but servant leaders continually put the focus not on their own personal needs but on the needs they're called to serve.

Today we are honoring our current head servant leader, Mary Carlson. I asked her to tell me what the Thrift Shop means to her. You can tell that she has a heart for service with these words: "I have seen so many customers come in and they tell me that they were just having a bad day and needed to come to the thrift shop to see some friendly faces. That, to me, means we are doing our job. Each day brings love, compassion, empathy, sympathy, laughter and fun."

I asked a couple of volunteers to share with us some behind-the-scenes stories from the shop. Carol Zakel wrote this: "Every day at the shop is unique, rewarding and fun! Many days there is a call from Nancy Frey who is in the back sorting incoming clothing, shoes, purses, etc. We'll hear her say, "Girls, come on back and see what I found!" She sits with a sheepish grin, wearing an exceptionally creative hat plopped on her head or holding an "unmentionable" item we can't believe was donated to a church thrift shop!

Carol also gives this inside tip which perhaps will help us recruit some new volunteers. "It is the very best place to search for extremely tacky holiday white elephant gifts." (And of course volunteers see all the merchandise first!)

"On a serious note, Mary has carried out maybe the most important mission - a sincere and natural compassion for the customers. With the 'regulars' she shares their

joys and sadness and always inquires about health, family members and important events in their lives — real bonds that make people feel welcome and connected.”

Jean Grady credits Mary with transforming the Thrift Shop. We used to call it to the “Miracle Thrift Shop on Lear” but now we call it the “Miracle Boutique Store on Lear.” When we were engaged in the Daniel Plan, Mary brought carrots and nuts to the Thrift Shop so everyone could stay encouraged and talk about their progress.

There is a sense of caring for each customer and volunteer which is what makes the Good Neighbor Thrift Shop such a special place. A place where servant leadership is practiced.

The week before Easter, I visited some of our homebound members and brought communion. I was in between visits when I received word that a major news story was taking place. During Holy Week, in Paris, the Notre Dame cathedral began burning. It would be a day before the fire was completely extinguished. That such a structure, 850 years old, could burn...that a church so many people have visited could burn...during Holy Week...it was an event that touched people deeply, and not only people who had visited or wanted to. When I arrived at Independence Village, residents were in the hallway talking about it, watching it together, shocked and saddened.

I read a story this week that calls to our minds the anonymous servant leaders who built Notre Dame and other magnificent cathedrals, a story that reminds us of how much of our service to others is often unnoticed. This story is called, “Invisible Mother.” It could be called “Invisible Father” or “Spouse” or “Caregiver” or “Volunteer” (or “Thrift Shop Volunteer”). Perhaps nurses and teachers can also relate. I hope each of you can relate in some way. But this is written from the point of view of a mother:

Invisible Mother

It all began to make sense, the blank stares, the lack of response, the way one of the kids will walk into the room while I'm on the phone and ask to be taken to the store. Inside I'm thinking, 'Can't you see I'm on the phone?'

Obviously not; no one can see if I'm on the phone, or cooking, or sweeping the floor, or even standing on my head in the corner, because no one can see me at all. I'm invisible. The invisible Mom. Some days I am only a pair of hands, nothing more! Can you fix this? Can you tie this? Can you open this??

Some days I'm not a pair of hands; I'm not even a human being. I'm a clock to ask, 'What time is it?' I'm a satellite guide to answer, 'What number is the Disney Channel?' I'm a car to order, 'Right around 5:30, please.'

Some days I'm a crystal ball; 'Where's my other sock?', 'Where's my phone?', 'What's for dinner?'

I was certain that these were the hands that once held books and the eyes that studied history, music and literature -but now, they had disappeared into the peanut butter, never to be seen again. She's going, she's going, she's gone!

One night, a group of us were having dinner, celebrating the return of a friend from England . She had just gotten back from a fabulous trip, and she was going on and on about the hotel she stayed in. I was sitting there, looking around at the others all put together so well. It was hard not to compare and feel sorry for myself. I was feeling pretty pathetic, when she turned to me with a beautifully wrapped package, and said, 'I brought you

this.' It was a book on the great cathedrals of Europe . I wasn't exactly sure why she'd given it to me until I read her inscription: 'With admiration for the greatness of what you are building when no one sees.'

In the days ahead I would read - no, devour - the book. And I would discover what would become for me, four life-changing truths, after which I could pattern my work:

- 1) No one can say who built the great cathedrals - we have no record of their names.
- 2) These builders gave their whole lives for a work they would never see finished.
- 3) They made great sacrifices and expected no credit.
- 4) The passion of their building was fueled by their faith that the eyes of God saw everything.

A story of legend in the book told of a rich man who came to visit the cathedral while it was being built, and he saw a workman carving a tiny bird on the inside of a beam. He was puzzled and asked the man, 'Why are you spending so much time carving that bird into a beam that will be covered by the roof. No one will ever see it'

And the workman replied, 'Because God sees.'

I closed the book, feeling the missing piece fall into place. It was almost as if I heard God whispering to me, 'I see you. I see the sacrifices you make every day, even when no one around you does.'

No act of kindness you've done, no sequin you've sewn on, no cupcake you've baked, no Cub Scout meeting, no last minute errand is too small for me to notice and smile over. You are building a great cathedral, but you can't see right now what it will become.

I keep the right perspective when I see myself as a great builder. As one of the people who show up at a job that they will never see finished, to work on something that their name will never be on...

When I really think about it, I don't want my son to tell the friend he's bringing home from college for Thanksgiving, 'My Mom gets up at 4 in the morning and bakes homemade pies, and then she hand bastes a turkey for 3 hours and presses all the linens for the table.' That would mean I'd built a monument to myself. I just want him to want to come home. And then, if there is anything more to say to his friend, he'd say, 'You're gonna love it there...'

As parents, as volunteers, we are building great cathedrals. We cannot be seen if we're doing it right. And one day, it is very possible that the world will marvel, not only at what we have built, but at the beauty that has been added to the world by the sacrifices of invisible servant leaders. (Original author: Nicole Johnson)

Jesus said, "I am among you as one who serves." Let us serve one another in love and humility, for forty more years, for as long as God gives us breath.