

“Spirit-filled Leadership”

Mark 10:42-45

Ralph Smith, the Regional Minister of the Christian Church in Kansas, was a tall, handsome man. He was intelligent and witty while being a commanding presence. After all, he was the head of more than 100 congregations in his denomination. One day, when visiting his office, I noticed hanging above his bookshelves was a strange hat. It was a baseball hat but it had two bills – one on the front and one on the back. On one side were printed the words, “Where did they go?” When I turned it around, the other side said, “I must follow them, for I am their leader!”

Time magazine asked the question, “Who’s in charge?” They answered their own question with these discouraging words: “The nation calls for leadership, and there is no one home.”

Historian James McGregor Burns in his pivotal book, Leadership, says, “One of the most universal cravings of our time is a hunger for compelling and creative leadership.” And another expert says, “The leadership crisis of our time is without precedent.”

The next two weeks I want to talk about Christian leadership. Today, I have three points and ten characteristics. **Leadership is a deeply spiritual activity.** Stephen Covey, the author of the Seven Effective Habits... series (who is a secular writer) wrote about leadership: “Those striving to be good leaders see life as a mission, not as a career. Their nurturing sources have armed and prepared them for service. In effect, every morning ‘yoke up’ and put on the harness of service, thinking of others. See yourself each morning yoking up, putting on the harness of service in your various stewardships. See yourself taking the straps and connecting them around your shoulders as you prepare to do the work assigned to you that day. See yourself allowing someone else to adjust the yoke or harness. See yourself yoked up to another person at your side – a co-worker or a spouse – and learning to pull together with that person.” He goes on to say, “I emphasize this principle of service or yoking up because I have come to believe that effort to become a good leader without a load to carry simply will not succeed. We may attempt to do it as a kind of intellectual or moral exercise, but if we don’t have a sense of responsibility, of service, or contribution, something we need to pull or push, it becomes a futile endeavor.”

I want to focus on a specific kind of leadership. It is from an ancient philosophy but has recently been resurrected: “servant” or “service” leadership. This kind of leadership can be found in many religious texts, though the philosophy itself transcends any particular religious tradition.

- 4th Century BCE from the book Arthashastra: *“the leader shall consider as good, not what pleases himself but what pleases his followers”*. *“The leader is a paid servant and enjoys the resources of the state together with the people”*.
- From Islam: *“the leader of a people is their servant”*.
- From Jesus: *“You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever want to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be servant of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”* Mark 10: 2-5

These and many other religious writings confirm that service leadership is a deeply spiritual activity.

Leadership is a self-less action. One of the key marks of a good leader is that they seek service to others over self-interest. That is why “we gladly look to them for direction and guidance in times of indecision, turmoil and trouble,” according to a *Leadership Now* article.

In the Fifth century B.C.E., the Roman army was surrounded. The country was in need of a leader who would seize the moment and turn the situation defeat into victory. They called upon a man who was out plowing his field, a farmer. He came. He saw. He conquered. And he went home. Cincinnatus gained fame for his selfless devotion to his country. This half-legendary hero of the Roman Republic gave his all in a time of crisis and then gave up the reins of power when the task was done and then went back to his plow.

In more modern times, America's first President, George Washington, considered "the Father of his Country," provides a paramount example of this same kind of custodial leadership.

Washington was an aristocratic gentleman farmer of distinctive character. When called upon to defend the interests of a fledgling nation as Commander in Chief of the Revolutionary Army during the American War of Independence, he rose to the challenge and persevered against all odds. Then, after eight and a half years of being the most powerful man in America, he resigned his commission and returned to his agricultural pursuits.

Not surprisingly, he became the reluctant, yet the automatic and unanimous choice for the first president of the United States. He served two terms. His final and perhaps greatest act of

service to his country was that like Cincinnatus, with whom he had often been compared by his contemporaries, he stopped serving and retired back to his Mount Vernon estate in Virginia.

Washington is remembered for his strength of character and discipline, his loyal patriotism, his principled leadership and selfless devotion to public duty. He held in trust for the American people the very values and beliefs that made their nation possible without regard for his own gain.

In reality, true leadership is and has always been a selfless action. But it is more than that. **Leadership is also a matter of spiritual stewardship.** Machiavelli, the Renaissance writer thought to be incredibly cynical and yet an observant political thinker insisted that leadership was virtuous only if the good of the community was sought out and achieved above all else. A good leader, in other words, is a steward of the community.

A good leader offers a service that is not about ownership or control. A spiritually attuned leader watches over that which is placed in their trust by the one who owns it for those who will benefit by it. Leaders are spiritual stewards entrusted with resources not their own but in their care.

There are **10 characteristics of service leaders** identified by Larry Spears:

- Listening
- Empathy
- Healing
- Awareness
- Persuasion
- Conceptualization
- Foresight
- Stewardship
- Commitment to the growth of others
- Building community

Other leadership experts (such as Bolman, Deal, Covey, Fullan & Sergiovanni) name these same components of effective leadership.

The Center for Servant Leadership at the Pastoral Institute in Georgia says it best: “servant leadership is a lifelong journey that includes discovery of one’s self, a desire to serve others, and a commitment to lead.”

Unlike the leadership approaches in a top-down hierarchical style, service leadership emphasizes collaboration, truth, empathy, and the ethical use of power. At heart, the individual is a servant first, making a conscious decision to lead in order to better serve others, not to increase their own power.

This very week, on CEO, Dan Price, took a 90% pay cut and slashed his company's profits just so he could give his employees a raise. Price, who heads up the Seattle payment processing firm Gravity Payments that he founded, has pledged to make sure all of his staffers make at least \$70,000 annually in the next three years. To do that, he's cutting his \$1 million salary to \$70,000, and dipping into the firm's annual \$2 million in profits. This will double the pay of about 30 of his workers and will mean significant raises for an additional 40 people.

When asked how he settled on \$70,000 per employee, he said that he learned that was the income needed to meet the basic needs of a family. He did not want his employees to be distracted from their work trying to meet the needs of their families because he was not paying them enough. And he was willing to put his own salary at that level to ensure that it is a livable wage. This is service leadership.

No matter your age or your employment status, I would encourage you to think this week about how you can be a service leader...in your home, in your volunteer work, in our church, in our community, and in your profession. What can you do to make your actions?:

- Deeply spiritual
- A service to others and self-less
- Concerned with stewardship
- Based on the service leadership traits?

Resources Used:

<http://www.leadershipnow.com> "The Focus of Leadership" by Michael McKinney

"Progressive Christians Speak: A Different Voice on Faith and Politics" edited by John B. Cobb

"Principle Centered Leadership" Stephen R. Covey

"The Leadership Challenge" by James Kouzes and Barry Posner

"Learning to Lead; Bringing Out the Best in People" by Fred Smith

"Selecting Church Leaders" by Charles Olsen & Ellen Morseth