

The Call to Servant Leadership

The Distinction Between 'Authority' and 'Authoritarian'

Mark 10:35-45 Nehemiah 5:14-15
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Hear these words again, and let them speak to you:

Jesus called the disciples and said to them, 'You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant.'
Mark 10:42-43

Jesus may have not coined the term 'servant leader' but that's exactly what he proposes as the model for those who follow his ways and teachings. That model applies to us today, whether you are the president and CEO of a major corporation, a mid-level manager, a politician, a parent, a pastor, a member of any organization, or simply a human being. In many and various ways, we find ourselves in positions of leadership – and don't forget that includes being the leader of our own personal lives. You are the leader of yourself.

There are several things at issue here. **One of the themes that ties in closely with servant leadership deals with the difference between being in a position of authority, and the leadership style of being authoritarian.** Knowing the difference is crucial. I have mentioned this before, but back when I attended seminary, we spent a good deal of time on this topic, because we were informed it would greatly impact our ministry as a pastor of a congregation. As pastors-in-training, we were warned to beware the temptation of power and control, as defined as an authoritarian relationship with the congregation.

Yet, on the flip side of that, we were also cautioned to not shy away from the inherent authority that comes with the position and responsibilities of a pastor and preacher. Many of us were a bit confused, because we weren't really clear on the actual distinction between having authority and being authoritarian. After all, many of us were part of the anti-authority generation in the 1960s and 70s. But as it turns out, **if persons who are in positions of authority do not exercise that responsibility as a leader, then they will become ineffective at best, to potentially destructive.**

Let me explain by applying this to the task of parenting. And yes, while I have no personal experience in this regard, it is certainly something I have studied and witness through my years in youth ministry. The position, role and responsibilities of being a parent comes with an inherent authority, which if *not* exercised may likely lead to later problems with that child (that's above all the usual issues in raising a child). Family counselors rightly suggest that the key, however, is to not become authoritarian, as in transforming a parent's rightly-given authority into a weapon of power and control to the point of some kind of totalitarian domination over their child.

In addition to parents, pastors and church leaders, this dynamic can and should be applied to anyone in a position of authority, including educators, those in the business world, and of course politicians. This difference between having authority and being authoritarian is wonderfully explained in the book, *Saving Jesus From Those Who Are Right*. The author, feminist theologian Carter Heyward, while a professor of Theology at the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, writes:

Authority, the 'power to authorize' or the '**ability to empower**,' can be held and bestowed in just and unjust ways. Authority is a morally neutral concept, neither good nor evil in itself... By contrast, '**authoritarianism**,' **the hoarding of authority as power over others**, is always spiritually problematic.

The biblical term used for this hierarchical, authoritarian style of leadership, which we heard about in both scripture passages this morning, is "**lording it over**" others. The Old Testament reading from the book of Nehemiah reveals that as a governor, he refused to "lord it over" the people like the previous governors did. For they laid heavy burdens upon the people and took from them food and wine and money. That's the pyramid structure I talked about last Sunday where 'gratitude' became an obligation and expectation of those lower down. This usually came in the form of taxes and goods. We're told that even the servants of these authoritarian governors "lorded it over" the people. Examples of this kind of governing can be found in many countries today wherever people are led by authoritarian dictators or heavy-handed politicians.

I will take the risk of veering into politics enough to say that I think some politicians at our national and state levels confuse, perhaps intentionally, the inherent authority of their elected positions with being authoritarian, wanting to hoard authority as power in order to "lord it over" others. Sadly, there is no better example of authoritarian abuse in religious circles than when it is used by those who think they possess the power and control to dictate and demand that others think, behave, believe, and interpret the scriptures the same way they do.

So yes, accusations of lording it over others can indeed be leveled at certain religious organizations, their leaders, and their practices. As an example, **is not the continued refusal to ordain women into church leadership roles within certain faith traditions, along with the desire to control decisions concerning women's health issues, including birth control, nothing less than age-old attempts to lord it over women?** Those of us on the progressive end of the theological spectrum, devoted to issues of social justice and equality, often find ourselves feeling called to speak truth to power to others in positions of authority within our community and denominations.

In today's gospel reading from Mark 10, Jesus makes a reference to "lording it over" others in relation to how the Gentiles govern their people. Jesus immediately follows this statement by commanding the disciples, "But it shall not be so among you." For it seems that brothers James and John had ambitious and prideful issues of power and control of their own. They had the gaul to ask Jesus to grant them anything they asked. But like a wise parent responding to a child, Jesus, before saying yes first asks, "What do you want me to do for you?" The response: Oh, nothing less than to let us sit at your right and left hand in your glory. **We see that it's nothing new to want to move up the ladder and scale of importance and influence, to be closest to those with the most power and control.**

Many good religious folks, including many pastors, seem to have forgotten **the core of Jesus' ministry: to serve, not to be served – to be a servant leader**. I found a website this week, the *Robert K. Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership*. It includes the following on their home page:

While servant leadership is a timeless concept, the phrase "servant leadership" was coined by Robert K. Greenleaf in *The Servant as Leader*, an essay that he first published in 1970. In that essay, Greenleaf said:

"The servant-leader is servant first... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. **That person is sharply different from one who is leader first**, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions... The leader-first and the servant-first are two extreme types. Between them there are shadings and blends that are part of the infinite variety of human nature.

"The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served. The best test, and difficult to administer, is: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived?

A servant-leader focuses primarily on the growth and well-being of people and the communities to which they belong. While traditional leadership generally involves the accumulation and exercise of power by one at the "top of the pyramid," servant leadership is different. The servant-leader shares power, puts the needs of others first and helps people develop and perform as highly as possible."

And for those of us who love lists, I found the following on the *Skip Prichard, Leadership Insights* website. An article entitled, "9 Qualities of the Servant Leader" provides this list:

1. Values diverse opinions.
2. Cultivated a culture of trust.
3. Develops other leaders.
4. Helps people with life issues (not just work issues).
5. Encourages.
6. Sells instead of tells.
7. Thinks "you," not "me."
8. Thinks long-term.
9. Acts with humility.

I'd like to challenge you to **reflect this week upon your own leadership style and the inherent authority you have in your life**: in your home, at work, in the various organizations in which you are involved (including the church), in your relationships with others, and even how you leader yourself. I've been focusing on that a lot lately in my

role as pastor of this congregation. I find the list above as a good measuring stick. It is humbling, for there is always room for improvement.

So, it is my prayer that God will show us ways to become more effective leaders – to focus on serving first, rather than on simply being served. In doing so, remember Carter Heyward's definition of authority as the "ability to empower" others. May God help us to become servant leaders.

Amen.