

Reflection on 'Lording It Over' and 'Ransom for Many'

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

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There are a couple of important issues I want address today. One concerns the role of servanthood and being a servant leader, making the distinction between having authority, and being authoritarian. The other is more theological. It's about exploring what many progressive Christians believe is now a misguided interpretation of when Jesus said that he came to give his life as a ransom for many. First, 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 adds that he came not to be served, but to serve. In other words, we're not to be about ascending into the power of supremacy for the sake of domination. On the contrary, we're about descending into the power of servanthood for the life of the world. That's what true greatness looks like in the kin-dom of God! This was a powerful theme that ran throughout the work and writings of Henri Nouwen.

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. For instance, **if persons who are in positions of authority do not exercise their responsibility as a leader, then they will become ineffective at best, to potentially destructive.**

When it comes to parenting, for example, 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. The term, 'helicopter parent' (those who constantly hover over their child) can, at times, reflect this.

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 today, 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. 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. And our nation, as well as in many states, is not immune from this type of leadership. 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?**

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, and that includes us, "**But it shall not be so among you**." Strong words! For it seems that brothers James and John had ambitious and prideful issues of power, privilege, and control of their own. They 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, the *Robert K. Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership*. It includes the following on their home page:

The servant-leader is servant first... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first...

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.**

I put our own church member, Lori Decter Wright into this category in and through the exercise of her leadership on the Tulsa City Council. Thank you, Lori, for the model you share.

I'd like to encourage 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 lead yourself.

Let's change gears now and get to the more theological part of this passage. **The phrase of Jesus that he came to be a ransom for many has frequently and traditionally been interpreted as supporting ways of understanding the meaning of the cross as a kind of a ransom payment.** There are two primary understandings of this. One is a ransom payment **to the Devil** (something many of you may have never even heard of). Another is a ransom payment **to God** — as in some “**substitutionary atonement**” theories in which Jesus suffers punishment in our place for our sins in order to satisfy divine justice, and in order for God to forgive us, and thus humanity's salvation, at least for those who believe this. I don't!

But here in Mark 10, **Jesus mentions no such need and no such payee** — strange omissions if that's really what's on his mind. So strange, in fact, that he must have other ideas. A commentary on this passage from an organization called SALT explains it this way.

What ideas? Well, for starters, a “ransom” is something of value given for the sake of liberating a captive — and in Mark's Gospel, Jesus does indeed come as a healer and liberator. But what particular ailment, what particular captivity is highlighted here in these chapters, again and again? **It's not captivity to demonic forces; nor is it captivity to an unpayable debt owed to God. On the contrary, it's the disciples' captivity to self-centeredness, and to conventional notions of power, prestige, and supposed “greatness.”...**

Following Jesus means liberation from the cell of self-absorption, opening us up to God and neighbor in humility, generosity, and love — which is to say, opening us up to true servanthood... **Thus the phrase, “to give his life as a ransom for many” amounts to a poetic way of saying, to pour out his life in servanthood to humanity, even in the face of fierce opposition — and so at once to show us the way and to liberate us into living it.** The incarnate Son of God gives something of value — his life — for the sake of our freedom, our learning to **follow him along the Way of being a “servant of all”** with humility, generosity, love, and grace...

Jesus calls his disciples [calls us] to the humble, down-to-earth way of servanthood, a life of genuine greatness seeking to serve, not dominate; to descend, not ascend; and to humbly, justly, beautifully love, not arrogantly jockey for position.

Greatness, then, is sacrificial in that it isn't found in being self-serving or lording it over others, but rather in serving others, in our goodness and humility and compassion and generosity.

This must be reflected in our own leadership style – as a servant leader. In doing so, remember Carter Heyward's definition of authority as the "ability to empower" others. That's how we are called to be and act in the kin-dom of God. With God's help, may it be so.

Amen.

Resources:

"Ransom: SALT's Lectionary Commentary for the Twenty-first Week After Pentecost, October 12, 2021.