



Sermon by: Rev. Robert W. Ater  
Text: Mark 10:35-45

October 20, 2024

### Considering Servant Leadership

In our house, we often record live television, even the morning news! Not only does it mean that I can get a few extra minutes of sleep in the morning by replaying the *Today Show* on the DVR, thirty minutes after it started, but it also means that I can fast-forward through the commercials. This has been all the more important to me in these recent weeks, when it seems that three out of every four commercials is a political ad! A recent article<sup>1</sup> authored by Temple University media and communication professor Heather LaMarre, reports that a projected 10.7 billion dollars is being spent on political ads this season alone, particularly in so-called battleground states like Wisconsin. The result she reports, however, is not better-informed voters, but exhausted, angry, and stressed voters. Many of the ads we see today are negative, where one party or candidate is attacking the other. LaMarre points out that in a deeply divided electorate, these ads often don't result in the hoped-for outcome. Minds are rarely changed and instead, voter turnout among the less politically interested may actually be reduced when people already feeling marginalized from the process put their hands up in disgust and back off altogether. In her analysis of the situation, LaMarre warns that the arguments for the value of negative advertising, that people pay attention better, are actually very outdated and that voters have grown resentful. This situation begs then, for perhaps another perspective, some reconsideration, a new way of thinking!

So, into this context of our lives today in 2024 Wisconsin, just a few weeks away from what is likely one of the most consequential presidential elections in history, comes this text today in our lectionary, about power, authority, and leadership as we consider what kind of leaders we need and want. Perhaps like the outdated and outmoded way of thinking about something like political advertising, Jesus tries to offer his disciples a new way of thinking, too, when he proclaims to them, that he has come "not to be served but to serve." Although in our contemporary Christian tradition, we may be accustomed to hearing Jesus talk like this, this type of counter-cultural thinking likely sounded altogether radical to the disciples, a sort of table-turning, flip-a-whole-idea-on-its-head approach. Jesus says and shows the disciples, that he is not a leader who wields power and control, instead, he's the one who comes to serve!

In today's text from Mark's gospel, we find Jesus traveling with his disciples on the way to Jerusalem. After Jesus predicted his passion and death a third time, James and John speak up, asking Jesus to do for them whatever they ask, specifically that they each want a place next to him at his table in glory. Jesus responds by saying that they "do not know what they ask," they've either not been listening to Jesus or can't wrap their minds around the idea of what he has predicted, his own condemnation to death -

surely not what they want for themselves and not what Jesus wants for them either. The text also tells us about the other ten disciples, you can almost see them, in your mind's eye, peaking through hands with red faces both embarrassed and angry . . . "seriously guys," they might have asked, "what are you doing, what makes you think you can ask Jesus something like that? And what about the rest of us?!"

So, Jesus responds in a way that seeks to shift the whole paradigm of their thinking, as if to say something like, "my whole ministry, our time together, this experience we've shared has never been about being recognized as one with power and authority, instead it's always been about loving and serving others: blessing the children, healing the sick, binding up the broken-hearted." He even points to the Roman authorities of their day, to say, "we're not about tyrannical rule and lording power over one another like them, our power comes *not* from being served by others but instead *in* serving others! Our power comes from the relationships we make with one another and those we serve, and the love that is expressed through those relationships."

The good news for Christ's disciples of every age, is particularly good news for those who by Roman authority and perhaps even many of our cultural norms today find themselves more often on the outside, looking in. "In truth," one theologian asserts about this text, "the powerful governance of the God who created the heavens and the earth,"<sup>2</sup> the God to whom today's Psalm called us to worship, bow down, and kneel before, brings power for the 'lost,' the needy, those who have perhaps until this word, never been served by another. The text is part of a bigger story that is in essence a "laboratory in discipleship, a crash course in what it means to follow Jesus."<sup>3</sup>

We follow Jesus, we find our power, the only power and authority that will ultimately matter, in the ways we love and serve one another.

One important relational form in our contemporary culture that this gospel message has taken is in what has come to be known as servant leadership. Following the lead of Jesus in today's text, the principles of servant leadership, beautifully articulated in the popular Prayer of St. Francis that was our middle hymn today, invites a new way, perhaps a counter-cultural way, of being in community with one another: where there is hatred, we are called to bring love, where there is injury, pardon, where there is despair and sadness, bring hope and joy. The prayer calls us to prioritize consoling, understanding, and loving one another ahead of our own desire to be consoled, understood, and loved. Perhaps somewhere at the heart of the prayer is the promise that if we all treat one another this way, we will both experience the joy of loving and caring for another and also the hope and peace of being loved and cared for ourselves.

The beautiful Prayer of St. Francis is attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, a 13<sup>th</sup> century Italian priest who started the Franciscan Order in the Catholic Church who has also been given credit for inspiring many of the ideals of what we call today, servant (or

sometimes Franciscan) leadership. It's worth noting, too, that this is the same St. Francis whose love of nature and animals has inspired the tradition of an annual Blessing of the Animals, now even in the Presbyterian tradition, around the birthday of Francis in early October. And I suspect that if Francis were with us today, he might say that he was simply pointing to the way of Christ himself in the way he calls us to lead our lives and to serve one another, what he was trying to communicate to James and John and the disciples in Mark.

A fascinating, if a bit academic, report<sup>4</sup>, recently published on the vast literature and study today of servant leadership found that it is overwhelmingly an American pursuit, discussed and studied most often in business management, the social sciences, and psychology. The number of times servant leadership shows up in writing and research has more than doubled since 2017, taking on new life in corners of the corporate world, too. According to a professional business management group,

“Servant leaders are a revolutionary bunch—they take the traditional power leadership model and turn it completely upside down. This new hierarchy puts the people—or employees—at the very top and the leader at the bottom, charged with serving the employees above them. These leaders possess a serve-first mindset, and they are focused on empowering and uplifting those who work for them. They are serving instead of commanding, showing humility instead of brandishing authority, and always looking to enhance the development of their staff members in ways that unlock potential, creativity, and a sense of purpose.”<sup>5</sup>

Servant leaders in these settings find that not only are they more satisfied in their work, but that their employees are too, their relationships are stronger, everyone is more productive, and the business is ultimately more profitable.

So, as we consider the call of servant leadership today, we're not just invited to consider the important questions of what kind of leaders we want to lead us, but also the kind of leaders, or even the kind of people, that we want to be. This kind of servant leadership, inspired by Christ, invites us to consider anew how we balance our own needs with the needs of the people around us, to consider the common good. It invites us to be both good listeners and thoughtful observers of the world around us in order to faithfully seek out and watch for places in the community that call us and invite us to serve. I think our time today with Philip Chard will help us do that as he helps us to better understand the psychology and neuroscience behind the deep divisions that we experience, particularly in the current context of electoral politics.

Exactly two months before his death in 1968, at the height of the civil rights movement, Martin Luther King, Jr. preached a sermon on today's text from Mark. Entitled “The Drum Major Instinct,”<sup>6</sup> King reflected on the human desire, in the context of those fraught days, “to be out front, the desire [that some might have] to lead the parade” like a drum major. King warned that this “desire for importance can lead to ‘snobbish exclusivism’

and ‘tragic race prejudice.’” He also pointed out that Jesus “did not rebuke [James and John] for their ambition, but taught that greatness comes from humble servitude, that Jesus reordered the priorities of life. ‘Keep feeling the need to be first,’ King encouraged, ‘but I want you to be first in love.’ ... Everybody can be great,” he concluded, “because *anybody* can serve, you only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love.”

In this tough election season we’re experiencing, let’s be encouraged and inspired by the words and actions of servant leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr., St. Francis, and Jesus himself to consider the call to servant leadership for each one of us and for all of us!

Today’s reading from the letter to the early Philippian Church, echoes this invitation:

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.<sup>7</sup>

May it be so!

AMEN

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<sup>1</sup> LaMarre, Heather, AZ Mirror, 9 October 2024, <https://azmirror.com/2024/10/09/the-blitz-of-political-attack-ads-youre-seeing-may-be-doing-candidates-more-harm-than-good/>

<sup>2</sup> Gaventa, Beverly A., et. al., *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV-Year B*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox), 1993, p. 549.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 555.

<sup>4</sup> Canavesi, Alice and Eliana Minelli, *Servant Leadership: A Systemic Literature Review and Network Analysis*, 28 September 2021, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8476984/>

<sup>5</sup> Tarello, Mark, *The Art of Servant Leadership*, 17 May 2018, Society for Human Resource Management website: <https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/organizational-and-employee-development/pages/the-art-of-servant-leadership.aspx>

<sup>6</sup> The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, “The Drum Major Instinct,” <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/drum-major-instinct>

<sup>7</sup> Philippians 2:1-5a, NRSV