

Traits of Kingdom Living: Servant Leadership

Luke 22:24-27 and Matthew 18:1-5

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Calvary Presbyterian Church

M. Michelle Fincher

This morning we resume looking at the Kingdom of God in terms of the traits or characteristics of kingdom living. In previous sermons we've already identified four key kingdom traits: radical love, speaking truthfully, discernment in judging others, and practicing forgiveness. This morning we examine a fifth kingdom characteristic—servant leadership.

Leadership is a hot topic these days. It doesn't matter what arena you're in, people want effective leadership. Yet what is it, precisely, that makes for a successful leader? There are lots of opinions about that. Some people think that great leadership is primarily innate, a God-given part of someone's personality or character that is just intrinsically who they are. Other people believe leadership can be taught, and certainly some leadership skills can be learned: just read one of the thousands of books available on the subject. In my own library here at the church I've got books on leadership that come from academic, business, and spiritual perspectives. Books like *Leadership on the Line*, *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership*, *Leading Change*, *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times*, *Extraordinary Leadership*, *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going*, and *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*. And that's just a sampling...I'm something of a leadership book junkie.

Every year *Forbes* magazine lists the 400 richest Americans, and that list is filled with exceptional leaders. For 2023, the highest-ranking person on the list was Elon Musk with a net worth of \$251B. The lowest ranking person on the list had a net worth of \$2.9 billion—poor thing, I don't know how they're going to get by. A lot of people on the list have names that are easily recognizable, for example, Bill Gates, Warren Buffet, and lots of Waltons from the Wal-Mart empire. There are CEOs from companies like Oracle, Amazon, Google, Apple, Dell and Facebook, now Meta. Without question, the men and women on this list are in the elite echelons of their fields. They are highly successful leaders and they have been rewarded handsomely for their skill and leadership.

Of course, not all successful leaders are rewarded with the kind of extraordinary wealth these folks have amassed. But, for those who occupy the top rungs in corporate America, entrepreneurial business, entertainment, politics, sports, sales,

medicine, education, law, and even the church, leadership in America often comes with significant perks. Sometimes those rewards are tangible—private jets, custom yachts and exotic travel; membership in exclusive clubs; multi-million dollar homes in posh locations around the world. Preferential treatment is the norm—corner tables in restaurants, front row tickets, sky box seats, and back stage passes. But, rewards come in other forms as well: access to other leaders in banking, government, or media that is denied to others. Influence in decision-making that affects thousands or millions of people. Leadership at the highest levels opens doors, carries authority, garners power, gains access and announces, “I’ve arrived.”

Compare our culture of leadership and reward with an itinerant 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish rabbi named Jesus. The one who said, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” (Matt. 8:20) The one who sent out his followers with the instruction to “take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff” (Matt 10:9-10a) The same leader who seemed recklessly unconcerned with the most basic of human needs: “Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?” (Matt 6:25)

He even had more than a few odd ideas about what a commitment to the kingdom would mean to family relationships and personal risk: “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” (Matt 10:37-39)

As we’ve encountered each of the past six weeks, a serious look at life in the kingdom of God continually challenges our notions of what is normal, meaningful, important, and successful. In the kingdom the concept of successful leadership is turned on its head. Leaders on the Forbes 400 list most often attribute their accomplishments in large measure to the strength and tenacity of their hard work. Jesus says that in the kingdom, leaders will succeed because they allow their weaknesses to be the fertile ground in which God’s strength can be manifest. Modern leaders often make it to the top because of their innovative vision, their creative thinking, the utilization of their intellect, or their physical prowess or their talents and gifts. In the kingdom, being the best is about setting aside our ideas, however creative they might be, and seeking to know what God’s ideas are; it’s about setting aside our agenda and discerning the will of God. It’s not about what we can do, but what God can do through us.

In God's kingdom successful leadership is measured in terms of servant-hood. Jesus left no doubt about it, because he modeled the kind of leaders he wanted his followers to be. He washed feet. He served food. He touched people that nobody was supposed to touch. Over and over again, he interrupted his schedule to give his time and attention to the very person no one else would have noticed, much less spent time with. He overlooked no one, but was quick to see the divine image in each and every person and to see God's presence and action in each and every life. Jesus was completely indifferent about having access to those with power and position but was passionately concerned that anyone and everyone had access to him. There was no one too dirty, too young or old, too immoral, too sick, too socially unacceptable to be beneath his compassion or beyond his care. And to tangibly demonstrate what he meant, Jesus took the hand of a child.

Unlike in our culture, in Jesus' society, children occupied the lowest rung of social importance and status. By some estimates, 30% of children died at birth, 30% of those who survived birth died by age 6 and 60% were gone before their teenaged years were over. Society placed little value on a group that was so weak and vulnerable. There was nothing about childhood that was to be admired or desired except the ability to survive it. So, it was shocking for Jesus to tell his disciples that they had to be like children if they wanted to be great in his kingdom. What could he possibly mean? Jesus was again challenging them, pushing the envelope, urging them to set aside what they thought they knew about what it means to be great and successful in God's eyes.

In God's kingdom, those with the advantage aren't those who know a lot, but those who are most willing to learn—like, for instance, children. Children love to learn something new; they're eager to try new things, and for them, the world is full of endless possibility. They aren't burdened with the usual adult baggage of thinking about cost, logistics, or the sensibility of a new idea. They just receive with joy the possibility of experimenting, growing, and changing. In exhorting his disciples to be like children, Jesus is saying that servant leadership in the kingdom has to tap into that kind of childlike curiosity and openness.

Rick McKinley, in his book, *This Beautiful Mess*, tells the story of two young men, Joe and Andrew, who had this sort of openness and excitement about something new. The two men had the idea to start sharing meals with some of the homeless in their area. It was a simple plan. Joe took his camp stove to the corner of 6<sup>th</sup> and Pine in Portland, Oregon, and started cooking dinner. Dinner was soup because soup was what Joe knew how to cook. Right away, Joe and Andrew had company for dinner. The next week, they went back to 6<sup>th</sup> and Pine with Joe's

stove and soup makings. They had more company this time. The two men really only had one plan for Joe's camp-stove dinners—to be back at the same street corner on the same day every week sharing a meal. And, that's what they did. Soon they had more company than Joe's camp stove could feed. They recruited help from friends who brought their camp stoves. The guest list grew to twenty, then thirty. Once they served 100. No fanfare. No reward. Just a simple plan for sharing soup as a way to meet a need they saw. That's what servant leaders do.

It matters, of course, that we serve others, but it also matters why we serve. In the kingdom, serving with the hope of gaining a reward is doing the right thing but for the wrong reason. The point of servant leadership is not to make us feel good about ourselves, not to pad our resume or elevate our reputation or build status. It's not about fulfilling our own need to be needed. Servant leadership is always centered on the needs of others and finding a way to respond compassionately to those needs.

Jesus was well within his rights to expect others to serve him, to wait on him and meet his needs. Yet, he reminds his disciples that he came among them as a servant, and his motivation for doing so was his great love for them. His faithful leadership was a model of love and humility, and these are the traits we are to emulate. This is difficult for us in large part because independence and autonomy are so highly valued in our society. Yet these are not the attributes that God seeks. Instead, it is child-like humility, a willingness to acknowledge that God is sovereign over our lives and then to submit to the ways of God's kingdom.

That's precisely why servant leaders are much more likely to be found on a street corner cooking soup over a camp stove than holding sway over a Fortune 500 boardroom. It's not that it is impossible to a successful leader in the kingdom of God and also a successful leader in whatever sphere we occupy in this world. But, Jesus warned us about the difficulties. Left to our own devices, the world encourages us to lord it over one another—rich over poor, intelligent over simple, men over women, one ethnic group over another, the educated over the unlearned, the strong over the weak. But, Jesus demonstrated another way. Even as the Messiah, the present and future king of God's kingdom, he was not seeking power, wealth, or prominence. This king wore a crown of thorns, rather than a golden crown of precious gems. He hung on a cross rather than sitting on a gilded throne. He served rather than being served and loved until it cost him literally the last breath in his body. And that is the kingdom to which he calls us to lead as servants.

Rick McKinley says that, “One of the biggest challenges to following Jesus into his kingdom is not a lack of direction but a lack of desire. Most of us don’t really want to do it.” (*This Beautiful Mess*, p. 50) When his fledgling church in Portland was just beginning, Rick recognized that this lack of genuine desire to love their community was a real issue for his tiny flock. To their credit, the group decided to pray about it. At first all they could muster was the honesty to tell God, “We want to care, but the truth is, we don’t—not really.” They confessed their fears—their fear of looking like radicals, their fear of losing their comforts. They actually began to speak their fear aloud, and to confess the disparity between what they said as good church folk and what they knew to be the real truth in their lives. Week after week they prayed for their city and for themselves and they told God the truth about what was in their hearts. And very slowly, something began to happen. It wasn’t dramatic, but gradually they began to change, and as their hearts began to change, they found themselves passing out socks and cigarettes to the street youth of Portland—not because they set out to start a new evangelism campaign or social services program, but simply because they began to truly care, and their care led them to see needs and people they had previously overlooked. It was an unlikely beginning and an unlikely way to discover what servant leadership is all about, but that’s what happens in the kingdom.

The question for us this morning is this: who do we really aspire to be—the servant leader Jesus modeled for us? Or, do we secretly wish we could be on the Forbes list of wealthiest Americans? Do we dare get honest with ourselves and with God? Desire for the kingdom is a work that the Holy Spirit does in us. Christ invites us to yield to that work, to embrace him as would a child, eager to embark on an adventurous journey. Let’s get started today. Amen.