

The Sanctity of Table-Waiting
Acts 2: 42-47; 6: 1-7
July 16, 2017

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When I began to think about how we might most profitably and faithfully spend our time together this summer it occurred to me that a walk through the oldest history book of Christianity, the Acts of the Apostles, might be helpful. And so I recommend that if you have not done this for a while, and I suspect not many of us have, it's a great idea to read the Acts of the Apostles from beginning to end. It won't take you all that long. It's an amazing story of the beginnings of the church. And along the way every time I think about this it occurs to me along the way that early church faced and wrestled with and tried to resolve issues that continue to face us today. So in that spirit, let us pray.

Startle us, O God, with your Word. Open our hearts and minds to the Word you have for us today, and help us to know your presence in our lives and in the lives of your churches everywhere. Now open us to your love in Christ Jesus we pray. Amen.

The New Testament lesson comes from that history book The Acts of the Apostles, the first portion from the second chapter. Listen for God's Word. "Awe came upon everyone because many wonders and signs were being done by the Apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common. They would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all as any had need. Day by day as they spend much time together in the temple they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts praising God and having the good will of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved." And now a portion of the first part of the sixth chapter of The Acts of the Apostles: "Now during those days when the disciples were increasing in number the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food, and the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, 'It is not right that we should neglect the Word of God in order to wait on tables; therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing full of the spirit and of wisdom who we may appoint to this task while we for our part will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the Word.' What they said pleased the whole community and they chose Stephen – and man full of faith and the Holy Spirit – together with Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a Proselytite of Antioch. They had these men stand before the apostles who prayed and laid their hands on them. The Word of God continued to spread, the number of

disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.” This is the Word of the Lord. *Praise be to God.*

A distinguished surgeon and prominent leader in the medical profession was asked by his surgical residents how in the world he learned to be a leader in addition to acquiring his legendary surgical skills. His answer surprised them. He gave them an assignment. “Tomorrow at the end of the day after we’ve completed our schedule, stay here for a while. Hang out in the operating room and learn the name of the woman who comes in to clean up after us. Find out if she has children. Learn their names and where they go to school and ask how they are doing. Ask her how she is doing when she is not mopping up the floor here.” Well the residents were perplexed. “What does that have to do with leadership?” they asked. And their mentor said it has everything in the world to do with leadership – kindness, attentiveness, accessibility, honoring the other, listening to and affirming the other - is where leadership begins.

Robert Greenleaf is a name some of you may know. He spent most of his very distinguished career in management, research and development at AT&T. In 1970, Greenleaf wrote an essay out of his long experience that reverberated throughout the business and corporate world and even found its way in the curriculum of theological seminaries and university divinity schools. The title of the essay was *The Servant As Leader* and coined the now familiar concept of *servant-leadership*. Thanks to Greenleaf and others we now recognize the best and most effective leadership in any field – business, medicine, education, even the military – is in some way servant-leadership. You know, one of the great puzzles of history is how and why Christianity happened. In an introduction to the book *The Triumph of the Meek: Why Early Christianity Succeeded*, scholar Michael Walsh wrote, and I quote, “On the face of it, Christianity had little to commend it. It sprang from an insignificant corner of the Empire far distant from the capital city Rome. Its roots lay in despised Judaism and its founder had been executed by the most demeaning of deaths - crucifixion. It had, at least at first, attracted the least influential members of society. Christianity then presents the historian with something of a paradox. After its modest beginnings in and around Jerusalem - in seventy years by the end of the first century, Christianity had spread throughout most of Palestine and Syria, Greece, Italy, Turkey and the coast of Egypt. By the year two hundred half of Spain, France, and North Africa were Christian. In another hundred years Christianity had spread west all the way to Britain and east to Iraq and Iran.” As Walsh observes it’s one of history’s great paradoxes and puzzles.

Secular historians weigh in and observe that economic conditions influenced the rise of the Jesus movement which was enormously popular with the large peasant population. But they also observed that Jesus seems to care about wealthy and privileged people as well. Monotheism was gaining interest – there is one God, not many – and for the first time in history there was an efficient transportation and communication network thanks to the Roman road system. In short, the time was ripe for the spread of a new idea, a philosophy, a religion. On the other hand, the Bible has its own approach to the question. In the Book of the Acts of the Apostles (which I’m encouraging to have a look at) there’s the activity of the Holy Spirit – God’s presence, God’s energy. There’s stories about Pentecost, and Peter and John hauled into court, and a man by the name of Saul of Tarsus persecuting Christians knocked off his horse one day, blinded, becoming a Christian with a new name, Paul, and then a passionate fearless missionary traveling from one end literally of the Roman Empire to the other by ship, on foot, preaching, starting churches. Stories about people with the names of Barnabas and Silus, John, Mark and Timothy. Stories of harrowing voyages and ship wrecks, and civil disturbances and jail breaks. And all the while in the midst of all that the primitive church, in its infancy, was dealing with issues that I believe continue to be current. This morning - a matter of leadership.

I conclude that part of the answer to the question of why the movement grew and thrived had to do with this new and revolutionary notion of leadership. Leadership as servanthood, leaders as servants. Jesus himself had said, “I came not to be served, but to serve.” Around the year thirty-five, a few years after Jesus – first believers are still in Jerusalem, the twelve apostles and a growing number of new converts. And according to Acts they went to the temple together regularly, they stayed together for moral support and security. They prayed a lot and apparently were conspicuously happy. There’s a lovely idyllic description of them: ‘All who believed were together and had all things in common. They spent time together. They broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts praising God and having the good will of the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.’ And in the midst of that lovely picture someone lodges a complaint: With all that glad and generous hearts business you’re forgetting something – the widows, the most vulnerable people of all in that society are not getting enough to eat. In all that praying and praising you’re overlooking a small but critical detail – those most vulnerable and powerless are hungry. So the twelve apostles start acting like Presbyterians – they call a meeting. They say in effect “we don’t have time for waiting on tables – we’re too busy preaching. So let’s have an election.” Not let’s appoint someone to do this job, let’s elect someone. Let the community make a decision. So the community gathers and elects seven people to take care of the hunger problem – to wait on

tables and serve bread to the widows - an important act of service. And then remarkably they gather around these seven and adopting an ancient Jewish custom they lay hands on them. They sanctify the servants – they elevate them and the result the Acts of the Apostles says is that the Word of God continued to spread, the numbers of disciples increased greatly. And I think it was because the Christians discovered something important about leadership.

First, leadership arises from below not descends from above. The community chose the seven, elected the seven. The apostles didn't appoint them. It's a small detail but so revolutionary, so utterly new that when you think about it the whole of human history goes in the opposite direction. Authority everybody knows is from top down, emperors and kings on top, subjects at the bottom. Tragically and ironically it took the early Christian Church about two hundred years to forget what it had learned and discovered about authentic leadership and revert again to hierarchy. Hierarchy was all anybody knew. Everyone agreed authority is top down, leaders at the top of the pyramid, everyone else at the bottom. So the church actually slowly began to model itself on that model – on the empire for its own governance. Priests exercise authority over people, bishops to exercise authority over the priests, and the Bishop of Rome to head up the whole organization. But here at the very beginning, a tiny seed of a new way of thinking about how things are meant to work in the world – people selecting from among their own members, their own community or church or nation for that matter – leaders to who authority is granted by the community. It's no wonder it took that idea so long to gain traction again. It's revolutionary. It turns the status quo upside down. Think of when and where it emerges in history: Magna Carta, sixteenth century Geneva with John Calvin challenging traditional definitions of leadership and teaching that people have the God-given right to choose their own leaders in church, but also in the community; the Mayflower compact; the Declaration of Independence; the Constitution of the United States. And in our own memory, our own time, Czechoslovakian Spring or the people of Leipzig, East Germany pouring out of a huge church carrying candles in hand tearing down a wall. And today - brave men and women risking life and limb to demand their right to choose their own leaders in Moscow, and Beijing. Just last week one of them died Liu Xiaobo, leader of the opposition and organizer of demonstrations in China, in prison for eleven years, died in prison denied the right to seek treatment for his cancer. True leadership arises – grows from the bottom up.

The second principal the early church learned was that good and effective leadership is inclusive and not exclusive. In his fine commentary on the Book of Acts, William Willimon, former Chaplain at Duke and a retired Methodist Bishop, points out something about this little story that

I'd missed before. The names of those seven chosen are not Hebrew names – they're Greek names. Stephen and Phillip, Prochorus, Nicholas – they're gentiles. They're outsiders to mainstream Jewish culture. They're looked down on, they're discriminated against, they're regarded as unclean even. It's the first hint that this new thing – this fledgling religion is going to cross a lot of boundaries and bring down a lot of powerful social barriers. An important thing happens when outsiders become insiders by being chosen by the community for leadership in society and in our church. Many, of course, haven't gotten around to that yet even though it is clear that women played major leadership roles in the earliest church.

We forgot about that for something like eighteen hundred years. We talked about it for decades but creative change happened when women were elected and ordained in ministry in our church – into all offices. I'll never forget when the first woman was elected moderator of our General Assembly after two hundred years of American Presbyterian history. She was one of the true saints of the church - Lois Stair. It happened here in 1961 when you ordained your first woman elder. And I absolutely love when I come through the back door walking down the hallway of this church and seeing pictures of the former pastors. There are sixteen of them and the last one, number sixteen, finally a woman Christine Chakoian. The same dynamic happened in regard to race. We talked about racial equality for a long time but institutional change happened when we elected African American elders and ministers. And just a few years ago we tore down another barrier and brought another wall down with a decision that gay and lesbian Presbyterians are no longer second class citizens but have the same right to leadership as anyone else.

The earliest church discovered that real leaders are servants. The first elected officials in the church were table waiters – servers, servants – and it has taken a very long time but we have finally learned that the best most authentic effective leaders in any area are servant-leaders. Robert Greenleaf's ideas are now standard operating procedure for one third of the top Fortune 500 corporations in this country, including businesses like Service Master and Men's Warehouse and Southwest Airlines. Greenleaf listed ten characteristics of servant-leaders among them: listening, empathy, awareness, holding something in trust for others, commitment to the growth of people, building community. One very successful businessman who reflected the idea of servant-leadership is Max De Pree, former CEO and Chair of the Board of Herman Miller, a top Fortune 500 furniture manufacturer. He's a member of the Fortune Magazine National Business Hall of Fame. Du Pree wrote a number of bestselling books with great titles: *Leadership Is An Art*, *Leading Without Power*, *Call To Serve*, and my favorite, *Leadership Jazz*. In that book he remembers visiting his new granddaughter Zoe in the hospital, born prematurely weighing one

pound, seven ounces. The Neonatologist told to pray that Zoe's chances of living were somewhere between five and ten percent. She had two IVs in her stomach and another in her foot, a monitor in each side of her chest, a respirator and feeding tube in her mouth. Her biological father had disappeared, and a wise nurse told Du Pree 'for the next several months you're the surrogate father. I want you to come to the hospital every day to visit Zoe. And when you come I would like you to rub her body and her arms and legs with the tip of your finger. And while you're doing that tell her how much you love her because she will connect your voice with your touch.' Du Pree observed the nurse was doing the exactly right thing on Zoe's behalf, and mine as well. And without knowing it she was giving me one of the best possible descriptions of the work of a leader.

Servant-leadership puts other people first – other peoples' needs first. Its fundamental element is care. Care for all those who are touched by the organization beginning with its own employees. People thrive in servant-leadership organizations. There's a growing body of evidence that companies that practice servant-leadership do better financially than those still adhering to the old top down hierarchal model. And it's not just a management technique. It's a good idea in personal relationships of any kind – marriage, parenting, teaching, doctoring and nursing, in the workplace – to focus on the needs of the other and ask 'what can I do to be helpful?' - to listen carefully, to pay attention, to focus not on yourself but always on the other. Garrison Keillor writes a weekly column that appears in the Chicago Tribune. It's not to be missed. Last week he described going in for cataract surgery and telling a funny story to relieve his own anxiety as the anesthesiologist was doing his job, he wrote the sedation guy was busy and didn't laugh but the nurse did. "She was an angel, and how often do you get to meet an angel? She grew up on a farm in Minnesota, is the mother of two teenagers, is a professional possessed of warmth and humor. She did the prep, slipped the IV in and ran through a battery of questions and patted me on the shoulder about 27 times in one hour." He goes on, "A lifelong reader writer like me blanches at the thought of my eye being sliced open. This woman's ease and kindness changed everything – *everything*." Keillor reflects, "it's a small thing kindness but when you're in the hands of a large institution with a barcode for identification, kindness feels like the key to civilization itself, and fulfillment of the Word of the Lord."

Greenleaf's characteristics of a servant-leader are what we hope ministers will be but also teacher, politicians, professionals of all kinds. It's what the Christian church is called to be, it's what you here in Lake Forest are called to be. From the beginning at it's very best the Church of Jesus Christ has understood itself not as the privileged bastion of the morally perfect and the

theologically correct, but as an organization whose purpose is to serve its own members and together to serve the world around it in the name of the one who came, not to be served but to serve. The church is the place where the good news of God's love is celebrated, proclaimed and expressed not only in words but in acts of kindness and generosity and humble service - bread broken and shared, shelter and clothing, and acceptance, forgiveness, compassion. The church is only the church as it lives for others reflecting the profundity of St. Francis of Assisi's instructions to his brothers, 'Preach the Gospel. If necessary, use words.' Every year you elect from your community officers to lead and serve - and in the very near future you're going to elect a new minister to lead by serving. And in the same right as that employed two thousand years ago when seven people were chosen to lead by waiting on tables, you and the Presbytery of Chicago will lay hands on them and give them the right to lead you in the very important days ahead.

One day Jesus said a remarkable thing to the disciples who were following him. He said, "You did not choose me. I chose you." In the deepest sense we believe that God has a hand in this process, that God calls women and men to service through the voice of the church, but beyond and before that I believe God comes to each one of us. God intrudes in our lives, God prods and pushes and nags and calls each of us - not all of us to be ministers (God forbid) - but I believe God calls all of us and each of us to live fully, compassionately, courageously the life we have been given. I believe God comes to us and calls us through our impatience with the way things are in the world. I believe God calls us in our anger at injustice, our care for the weakest and most vulnerable. I believe God calls us in our love for our children, our spouses, our dearest ones - calls us to serve them and to the best of our ability to protect them and provide for them and do everything we can to assure that their lives are safe and secure and full. I believe God calls us in our hunger for peace in the world and justice in our community and the hunger for wholeness in our own lives.

It's difficult to describe and most of us are not very comfortable trying to talk about it. But at the heart of our faith is the trust that God comes to us, challenges us, summons us, calls us to live as God's men and women, servants / servant-leaders, whatever we do every day of our lives. Amen.