

“Choosing to Serve”  
Rev. Cindy Maddox  
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Mark 10:35-45

Years ago I had a conversation that sounded very much like this passage  
from the Gospel According to Mark.

I was a new mom of a seven-year-old, and the seven-year-old in question  
apparently thought she could take advantage of my inexperience as a parent.

She came to me and said,

“I’m going to ask you a question, and I want you to promise you’ll say ‘yes.’”

I said, “No.”

She whined, “Ohh, why not? It’s a good thing!”

“I doubt that,

because if you really thought that *I* would think it’s a good thing,  
then you wouldn’t have to make me promise to say ‘yes’  
before you even tell me what it is.

So . . . what do you want to ask me?”

She hung her head. “Never mind.”

I tell you this story to point out that James and John, the sons of Zebedee,  
are about as subtle as a seven-year-old.

They say to Jesus, “We want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.”

Jesus wisely replies, “What is that you want?”

They want to sit by Jesus when he establishes his kingdom—  
one on his left and one on his right.

In other words, “Jesus, when we get you elected Messiah  
and your Kingdom is come, grant us to sit on your Cabinet!”<sup>1</sup>

Let us be Vice President and Secretary of State.

After all, we’re not only part of the 12—we’re part of the elite 3,  
the ones you took up to the mountain with you,  
who saw you get transfigured.

So give us a reward, Jesus.

Make it worth our while.

We can only imagine how Jesus must have felt.

He’d been putting up with these knuckleheads for what seemed like forever,  
and he tried to teach them his purpose, his mission,

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<sup>1</sup> Willimon, William H. “Good News?” [www.day1.org](http://www.day1.org).

and they were still clueless.  
 He had already interrupted an argument they were having about who was the  
 greatest  
 and told them that to be greatest, they had to be a servant of all.  
 That was only one chapter back!  
 Now here are two of the three he trusts the most—  
 the ones who, above all the rest, should understand—  
 and these sons of Zebedee still want glory and power.

I guess you could argue that it's human nature to want to be first sometimes,  
 to want to be the best, to want the honored position.  
 Scholar Jana Childers has said, "We have Zebedee DNA in our genes!"<sup>2</sup>  
 I think the other disciples had it, too,  
 because when they heard what James and John had asked,  
 they got angry.  
 Jesus assures them that "Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your  
 servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all."

It's a powerful statement—and a scary one.

I am strongly reminded of the concept of Servant Leadership.  
 The term "servant leadership" is credited to Robert Greenleaf  
 in the 1970s, although it could be argued that Jesus thought of it first.  
 It has become a popular leadership or management style to promote.  
 A simple, perhaps simplistic, explanation of the theory is that servant leadership  
 attempts to turn the tables on the traditional hierarchical view of leadership,  
 where subordinates serve the will of the head of the organization,  
 and the head is focused either on their own gain or on the end goals,  
 but not on the employees.

A servant leader mindset focuses on serving the employees  
 rather than one's own desires—  
 listening to employees, empowering them,  
 and meeting their needs.

These empowered employees are then happier employees,  
 and thus more productive, more creative, and less likely to leave.  
 Compared to the traditional hierarchy of corporations,  
 I think it's a much better model  
 BUT . . . it is also easy to misunderstand and can be deeply flawed.

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<sup>2</sup> As quoted in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 4, page 190.

I've seen church profiles that say they are looking for a pastor who is a servant leader,

and I always wonder what they really mean by that.

Do they mean "We want a leader who puts the good of the church before their own personal gain"? That's great.

Do they mean "We want a pastor who is collaborative and who listens and empowers people, rather than hoarding power"? Absolutely!

Or do they mean "We want a pastor who remembers their place as an employee and who does what we tell them to do, and only what we tell them to do, and who will do the work of the church for us, not with us, because we have no intention of working."

That isn't servant leadership; that is servitude.

Forbes magazine ran an article just last year about women as servant leaders.

I quote:

"When people think of a strong leader, many people subconsciously picture a man because of persistent stereotypes of men as commanding and goal-focused....

Meanwhile, because they're seen as more caring and people-focused, women have always faced a disadvantage—or outright discrimination—as leaders."<sup>3</sup>

The author says that the rise in the servant leadership model is good for women because women are "natural servant leaders."

The author says women excel at listening;  
they are seen as more caring, more people-focused;  
they are seen as less power-hungry, less authoritative.

It is "natural," the author says, and I wonder.

Are women naturally more caring, less power-hungry, less driven,  
or have women been socialized into developing those characteristics  
over more stereotypical male behaviors?

Are men socialized into competitiveness at the expense of kindness?

And is this the only leadership style available to women?

The (male) author's bias is shown in the title of the article:

"Women Are Natural Servant Leaders,

But Need Encouragement to Take on the Role."

That's the only reason there aren't more women CEOs?

They just need to be encouraged to step up and take on the role!

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<sup>3</sup> Gaskell, Adi. "Women Are Natural Servant Leaders, but Need Encouragement to Take on the Role." Forbes. Feb 25, 2020.

You can do it, honey!

My sarcasm aside, one of the big problems with the Servant Leadership model is how and where it is applied.

Too often top management tells middle management that *they* should be servant leaders.

And what is the gender and race of those at the top, compared to the gender and race of those in the middle?

Imagine you're a White male in upper management telling a Black female subordinate that "Here at Acme Suppliers we expect you to be a servant leader."

Eww. No.

I've read feminists who have called servant leadership empowering and others who basically call it gaslighting.

I didn't have time this week to read the full 175 page dissertation on the topic "Intersectional Leadership: A Critical Narrative Analysis of Servant Leadership by Black Women in Student Affairs" in predominately white institutions!<sup>4</sup>

But in what I did read, the author argues that the servant leadership model "is written and offered from a viewpoint skewed by the privileges that accompany race and gender in the United States social hierarchies."

She says that by making racial and gender oppression invisible, the systems are perpetuated.<sup>5</sup>

Now, since this is church and this is supposed to be a sermon, not an undergrad conversation on leadership styles, what is my point?

My point is actually a question:

Does the metaphor Jesus is quoted as using work in our contemporary context?

There are parts of the Bible, in both testaments, that we can say without a doubt still apply to us, and with metaphors that still work;

and there are other parts that clearly do not apply to us now.

In fact, some of them are illegal!

Which is this?

Are we called to be servants?

The text even says slaves.

Are we called to be slaves?

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[https://etd.ohiolink.edu/apexprod/rws\\_etd/send\\_file/send?accession=dayton1523721754342058&disposition=inline](https://etd.ohiolink.edu/apexprod/rws_etd/send_file/send?accession=dayton1523721754342058&disposition=inline)

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

To me, the answer to the second question is easier.

No, we're not.

We are not property.

We are not supposed to give up our freedom of choice.

Plus, with our nation's history of slavery, that is not a word or concept that works today.

Being followers of Jesus does not mean we are forced into roles of servitude. True Christian service is about choice.

We are called to choose to serve others  
instead of accepting our role of privilege.

We are called to choose to sometimes put others' needs  
before our own desires,

to choose to be generous,

to be bound by covenant,

to serve when we'd rather sit this one out, thanks.

In the church I grew up in, we practiced footwashing on Maundy Thursday.

Some of my most sacred memories came from watching

old people kneel down on arthritic knees

to wash the feet of another.

They were doing it by choice because they believed God called them to serve,  
and sometimes serving is uncomfortable.

They also had to choose to let someone else serve them,  
which sometimes is even harder.

We have so many wonderful examples of people who chose to make sacrifices  
for others:

like the "underground railroad" where people chose to risk their lives

for the freedom of people they didn't even know;

like Jimmy Carter, who after holding one of the most powerful positions in the  
world,

continued to serve by building houses through Habitat for Humanity;

like Ella Baker, a civil rights activist who worked mostly behind the scenes,

but who educated and empowered young people

to be the feet of the movement.

We choose to serve, willingly.

We choose to give, generously:

like Bonnie, who took in a family after they lost their home in a hurricane,

and ended up sharing her home with them for three years,  
and her heart with them forever;

We choose to give, generously:

like Vinton, a World War II vet and machinist  
who gave to his church's scholarship fund every year  
and by the time he died at 103 had given a quarter of a million dollars.

We choose to give, generously:

like the woman I knew who was an excellent church leader  
and guided the congregation through some incredibly difficult times,  
who used her influence wisely,  
but whose greatest service was behind the scenes.

Service, like generosity, is a choice.

We picked our closing hymn at our staff meeting on Tuesday,  
before I knew where this sermon would take me.

On Thursday I thought we might have to make a last minute change  
because the lyrics have the song beginning and ending with  
"Won't you let me be your servant?"

And servant has such negative connotations, and is too often unequally applied.  
But the definition of servant is merely "a person who performs duties for others"  
or "a devoted and helpful follower or supporter."

So instead of changing the song,

I've chosen to start with verse 2 to set it in context.

At the end of the service we will sing:

*We are pilgrims on the journey  
We are travelers on the road  
We are here to help each other  
Walk the mile and bear the load*

*I will hold the Christ light for you  
In the night time of your fear  
I will hold my hand out to you  
Speak the peace you long to hear*

*I will weep when you are weeping  
When you laugh, I'll laugh with you  
I will share your joy and sorrow  
Till we've seen this journey through*

These are the things we choose:  
to travel together, to help each other, to laugh and cry together,  
to speak peace.

Within this context we can sing:

*Won't you let me be your servant?  
Let me be as Christ to you  
Pray that I may have the grace  
To let you be my servant too*

You can choose whether to send the servant metaphor to the theological trash bin,  
or to reframe it and reform it.

The choice is ours.

But other choices are more important.

Will we seek power? Will we hoard wealth?

Or will we give generously?

Will we share abundantly?

Will we serve willingly?

Not sacrificing ourselves, but living into the best of ourselves  
with open hearts and open hands.

Amen.