

Servant Leadership

4th in a series on Peter's Principles

1 Peter 5: 1-11

05-10-2009 Sam Jones Memorial United Methodist Church

Introduction

Blake Mycoskie is an American success story. While attending Southern Methodist University on a tennis scholarship, he started a small company called EZ Laundry—a door-to-door laundry service for college students. After expanding to seven campuses, Mycoskie sold the company to his business partner. He moved to Nashville and started an outdoor media business. Clear Channel eventually bought out the company, and Mycoskie moved on to his next project.

He teamed up with his sister, Paige, and competed on the second season of CBS' Amazing Race. They came within four minutes of winning the \$1 million prize. Recognizing the popularity of reality programming, he started a TV channel called Reality/24/7. Then he moved to Los Angeles where he teamed with others to create an online drivers' education program for teenagers called DriversEdDirect.

While vacationing in Argentina in 2006, Mycoskie discovered the **Alpargata**—a traditional, rope-soled shoe worn by peasants. He was also struck by the systemic poverty of the area. Many families were too poor to provide even shoes for their children. The boys and girls often cut their feet with the constant danger of serious infections.

So Mycoskie founded **TOMS Shoes**—short for “Shoes for Tomorrow Project.” The company's motto is “*Make life more comfortable.*” In addition to selling shoes inspired by the Alpargata design, he made the commitment to donate a pair of shoes to needy children for every pair of shoes sold. To date, the company has given away over 140,000 pairs of shoes. The goal is 300,000 shoes in 2009.

Blake Mycoskie is doing well by doing good. He epitomizes the key phrase of today's Scripture lesson: “*eager to serve.*” We too are called to be servant leaders, sharing God's love with those around us in every day acts of service.

I. The New Testament Church

However, the concept of **servant leadership** can be challenging—even in church life. This has been the case since Jesus Christ founded the church. The book of Acts describes the early days of the New Testament church. The Jerusalem congregation grew exponentially. However, the Christian community was endangered by the actions of a few members. In Acts 6, the apostles had to address the first of many problems to come. The apostles solved the problem of human selfishness with divine servanthood.

The Christian church inherited from its Jewish origins a deep concern for the needy. **Alms giving** (the charitable donation of money to the needy) was a sacred duty. The church gladly cared for the less fortunate in the congregation. One of these special groups was **widows** with no other means of support.

The Greek Jews began complaining that THEIR widows were being slighted in the daily distribution of food. The Aramaic Jews countered that their widows were getting less. The once united church soon divided into two separate camps.

The apostles' response was nothing short of genius. Like all good upper management, they decided to make it somebody else's problem! After all, their primary task should be to proclaim the gospel. So they decided to share leadership by **delegating responsibility**. The church chose seven men to serve as "**deacons**." They were persons of "*good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom.*"

The role of deacon was an important job. They served second only to the twelve apostles in leadership within the Jerusalem church. One would suppose they had some lofty title with the expected perks and benefits. No doubt they were in charge of an important office and tell others what to do.

So after prayer, election, and the laying on of hands, the deacons were consecrated to . . . **wait on tables!** Their primary responsibility was handing out the daily food and administering the church's finances. If you think the job of waiter or treasurer are glamorous jobs in church life filled with prestige and respect, just ask the kitchen crew or financial secretaries!

However, it was an important ministry of the church that was essential to the continuing growth of the community of faith. **Deacon** literally means: "*one who serves*"

II. Servant Leadership

In secular society, **leadership** is almost always hierarchical in nature. There is a clearly charted, vertical chain of command. Employees are divided into boss and bossed, supervisor and supervisee. People with power get the prestige and recognition.

Such attitudes sometimes percolate into the church, too. I am often amazed at some of the stories that made it into the Gospels. A number do not cast the first disciples in a very positive light. Time and again their lack of understanding and insight was all too evident. Matthew 20 records one of those occasions.

Jesus and the Twelve had embarked on their final journey to Jerusalem. Christ had attempted to prepare them for his suffering and death, but his words could not penetrate their preconceived notions of glory and honor. During a rest stop on the trip, a small group of three people approached Jesus privately. **James** and **John** were among Jesus' closest friends. He gave them the nickname of *Sons of Thunder*—hardly a description of a meek, timid pair. However, these two rough, gruff fishermen followed submissively behind . . . their **mother!**

We don't know Mrs. Zebedee's first name, but she traveled with the disciples at times. She would later stand with the small group of women at the cross. Some evidence suggests that she was the sister of Mary, the mother of Jesus. If this was the case, then Mrs. Zebedee was Jesus' aunt and the two brothers his cousin.

The three approached Jesus and the mother said, "*Jesus, would you do me a favor?*" If she really was a relative, the underlying words were, "*Nephew would you do a favor for your favorite aunt?*"

Perhaps I'm a bit paranoid—okay, so I AM paranoid—but I am always suspicious when someone asks for undefined favors. Jesus asked, "*What is it you want?*"

Oh, nothing, really. "*Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom.*" She just wanted her two boys to get the chief spots of power and glory in God's kingdom! You've GOT to love mothers!

Jesus looked at her and said, “*You don’t know what you are asking.*” First, they still did not realize that they were on a death march. James and John were calling “dibs” on the two crosses flanking Jesus on Good Friday.

Secondly, they did not understand the true definition of greatness in God’s kingdom. Despite three years with Jesus, the “Sons of Thunder” still thought in worldly terms. Jesus said to James and John, “*Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*” On the night of Jesus’ betrayal, however, the disciples were still arguing in the Upper Room about who was the greatest of them all.

On Thursday night, Jesus and the disciples gathered in the Upper Room for dinner. Only later did the disciples realize this was the **Last Supper** they would share with their Master. In the coming hours, Jesus would be betrayed, arrested, deserted, denied, tried, and crucified. During the meal, Jesus took off his outer robe and wrapped a towel around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began **washing his disciples’ feet** and drying them with a towel.

Washing the feet of guests before a meal was an ancient custom of hospitality in the Jewish and Greco-Roman world. When company arrived at a home, they would find water, basins, and towels beside the doorway. The visitors could bathe their feet before entering the home. Wealthy hosts often had servants available to wash their guests’ feet.

However, Jesus did not act as the host of the meal or even a guest. Instead, he took on the dress and role of a **servant**—washing the feet of his disciples. The Lord once again turned the world’s ways upside down so that they were right-side up.

In Matthew 20: 28, Jesus told his disciples: “. . . *the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*” In the Upper Room, Jesus acted out a living parable that once again revealed his identity and mission.

If the disciples were uncomfortable when Jesus washed their feet, it only got worse. Afterwards, Jesus asked them: “*Do you understand what I have done for you? You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightfully so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.*” (John 13: 12-17)

Over the years, some churches have taken Jesus’ words literally and practiced regular “**foot-washing services.**” However, this never really caught on in mainstream Christianity! People are reluctant to have their feet washed or to wash others’ feet. We also resist following Jesus’ example in less literal ways. Our sinful self-centeredness prefers the role of master rather than servant. We seek to fulfill our own desires instead of ministering to others’ needs. Each of us wants to be “*the firstest with the mostest.*”

Two brothers were impatiently waiting for their mother to fix **pancakes** for breakfast. They began fighting over who would get the first stack. The mother saw this as a “teaching moment.” So she said to her two sons, “If Jesus was here, he would let his brother have the first stack of pancakes.”

The two boys reflected upon this theological lesson. Then the older boy said to his younger brother: “Timmy, Mommy’s right. So this morning I’ll let YOU be Jesus!”

Our natural tendency is to be first in life. We may smile at our children's unabashed self-centeredness, but the same principle occurs in our adult lives. We always want "*the front of the bus, the back of the church, and the middle of the road.*" However, Jesus came among us as "*one who serves;*" AND his disciples are called to follow the Lord's lead. (Luke 22: 27) When the disciples argued among themselves about who was the greatest, Jesus said: "*Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave.*" (Matthew 20: 26-27) Jesus calls us to a life of **servant leadership**.

Christian disciples are called to a lifestyle of servant leadership in imitation of Jesus Christ. I invite you to prayerfully consider what it would mean to live as "*one who serves*" at home, school, work, church, and community. What would our relationships look like as children, parents, spouses, friends, church members, and community leaders if we took seriously Christ's example: "*Not to be ministered unto but to minister?*"

The movie, *Entertaining Angels*, is set during the Great Depression and tells the story of Dorothy Day who takes on the ministry it house the homeless, feed, the hungry, and tend the sick. Her total savings, however, amount to 97 cents. In this scene, she displays the spirit of servant leadership.

IV. Practicing Our Serve

Today the title of "**deacon**" means different things in different traditions. In the Baptist church, deacons are elected lay persons who help guide the church. In the Roman Catholic Church, deacons assist in the sacraments and worship. In the United Methodist denomination, deacons are ordained ministers who serve specialized ministries. But I think the real mark of a deacon is not a specific function, job or title, but a spirit to servanthood. We are all called to cultivate the ministry of deaconhood in our lives: to be "one who serves."

A) Family

Service to our family. The old maxim says, "*Charity begins at home.*" This is also the birthplace of service. If our mother/father, sister/brother, spouse, and even the cat and dog are not happier because we're Christian, then something is wrong!

Mother's Day.

B) Friends, Neighbors

Random and senseless acts of kindness.

C) Work

Mistake we make if think we are working for someone else. We are ALL self-employed. We also make a mistake if we don't think we deal with the public. We ALL have clients to serve. In this context, I invite you to explore what it would mean to be a "servant-leader" in your vocational setting.

D) Church

How do we serve within our church? So many people already actively engaged in a life of service. Ministries: Meals on Wheels, MYF counselors, Sunday School teachers, tape delivery, etc. But many more needs remain. Where are you called to serve?

Conclusion

Many in this part of Georgia are familiar with the story of **Martha Berry**. She was born to a wealthy, “Old South” family in 1866 and raised on a plantation near Rome, Georgia. She could have chosen a life of comfort and ease. However, an encounter with some illiterate mountain children changed the course of her life. She began teaching the children Sunday School lessons in her old playhouse.

Sunday School soon became day school that taught not only the Bible but also the “Three Rs” of “Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic.” This was the humble origins of what would eventually become **Berry College**. “Miss Martha” created a school where the poorest farm children could study and work in order to gain a higher education.

Martha Berry’s personal motto became the college’s creed; and it is still inscribed upon Trustees’ Hall today: *“Not to be ministered unto, but to minister.”*

The same creed guides the Christian life. We are called to a life of servant leadership, seeking others good over our own. In the process, we discover a greater good in our own lives. Amen.