Lower is Higher

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Jesus is the greatest leader ever. Don’t take my word for it. Consider the biblical record. Jesus’ public ministry lasted all of three years. He never wrote a book. He never held public office. He never traveled more than two hundred miles from his hometown. He had no credentials but himself. Yet, more books have been written about him and more songs sung about him than anyone else did who ever lived. No one has been discussed or worshipped more than Jesus. Today, more people follow him than any other leader in the history of the world.

Jesus gives his followers a tutorial on leadership in Luke 22. Jesus’ approach to leadership is so upside down and counter-intuitive. If you aspire to greatness, become a servant. Leadership is not about popularity. It is not about self-interest. It’s all about the serving.

The evening meal Jesus shares with his disciples will be their last supper together. His disciples are oblivious to it, but we, as readers, are clued into this reality.

Jesus takes bread from the table, breaks it and announces, “This is my body, broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me” (22:19). Then he pours wine into a goblet saying, “This cup is my blood, shed for you” (22:20). His disciples must be thinking—what on earth is he talking about? Whatever does he mean—“This is my body, broken for you” and “This is my blood, shed for you?”
Then Jesus delivers a bombshell: “The hand of him who is going to betray me is with mine on the table” (22:21). You could have heard a pin drop. Who would ever do such a thing? Evidently, Judas is not a shoe-in for such a dubious distinction.

Luke tells us, “A dispute arose among the disciples as to which of them was considered to be the greatest” (22:24). I get it. If you are trying to protect your good name, you might be tempted to flaunt your own greatness.

Do not miss the irony here. While Jesus speaks openly about his broken body and shed blood, his disciples haggle over greatness.

Jesus continues, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over their subjects and call themselves Benefactors” (22:25). Kings often use their exalted status to pull rank over their subordinates and pass themselves off as benefactors, when, in reality, they are anything but generous. They use their wealth to gain power and control over people.

“You are not to be like that,” Jesus insists. “The greatest among you should be like the youngest and the one who rules like the one who serves” (22:26).

Jesus reinforces the theme of serving by talking about it three times in successive verses. In verse 26, the leader must become like “the one who serves.” In verse 27, Jesus asks
the rhetorical question, “Who is greater? The one who is at table or “the one who serves?” The way Jesus asks his question, begs his answer, “The greater one is the one who serves.” Then, in verse 28, Jesus summarizes his teaching with a reference to his own life: “I am among you as “one who serves.”

There you have it. Leadership is about service, not greatness. Do not seek greatness. Serve and you will be great in the eyes of God.

Leadership has become a trendy word in our day. There are more courses in academia on the subject of leadership than any I can remember. There is a glut of business seminars on leadership. With the influx of so many leaders into the market, who will be left to follow them?

Let me tell you the story of Robert Greenleaf. Robert worked for AT&T back in the ’60s and ’70s when the company had a virtual monopoly in the telecommunications industry. He served various leadership roles in the company. Robert became suspicious that the top-down, authoritative leadership style so prevalent in American business wasn’t working. He took an early retirement to speak on the leader as servant and wrote a book entitled Servant Leadership. He adopted his servant leader approach from Jesus’ teachings. He challenged the all-too-common business paradigm that power and control are integral to becoming an effective boss. He put forward the business model that a leader’s primary job is to serve employees and customers alike. Leaders who put others first, who are committed to help people discover
their full potential, create trust in an organization, which, in turn, is good for business.

We can apply this servant leader perspective to our belong! Outreach Center that we shared earlier in a video presentation. Our five million dollar Ignite initiative last year had three primary objectives. First, we wanted to eliminate the debt. Incidentally, we are now 70 percent closer to our goal of wiping out our $2.6M debt on church construction. We expect to become debt-free by the close of 2018.

Our second objective in Ignite is to retool our facilities for future ministry. We are working with an architect right now to renovate our narthex and first floor as well as refurbish the underground, which is the basement beneath this sanctuary. We will be back with you later in the year regarding these facility improvements.

Third, you might recall that we resolved to invest 30 percent of our five million goal toward a major outreach to the Cedar Park Apartment area two miles from here. The population in this area is largely recent immigrants to our community, most of whom have never heard the good news of Jesus Christ.

As you learned earlier in the video, we are calling this local outreach belong!. Earlier this week, we signed a letter of intent to lease space at the Cedar Park Shopping Center as a center of operation for this ministry.

With this in mind, let’s return to Jesus’ servant leader approach to ministry. This ministry will fall flat if we fail to serve the people we are trying to reach. If we communicate
a look-how-good-we-are-for-helping-you attitude, this ministry will be dead on arrival. If we pat ourselves on the back for being magnanimous and virtuous, people will see right through our phony-baloney attitude that is so toxic to genuine charity.

A university-educated man participated in a retreat led by Gandhi. Mohatma Gandhi is to India what Martin Luther King, Jr., is to civil rights in this country. When this college-educated man learned he was expected to clean the bathrooms, he vigorously protested. “Don’t you know I have a doctorate from the London School of Economics? I am meant to do great things.”

Gandhi replied, “I know you can do great things. What I do not know is whether you can do little things.” If you want to be great, do the little things. Lower is higher in the kingdom of God. What would it mean in our marriage and family relations if we assumed the lower position? What impact would it make in our neighborhoods, schools and businesses to assume the role of a servant?

So, what difference does this sermon make in our lives? Two things come to mind. One has to do with attitude; the other involves action.

First, attitude. We need an attitude adjustment when it comes to service. Attitude determines behavior.

Be honest. Do we want to serve or be served? It’s much easier to be served than to serve. If you doubt what I am saying, think of how you react when other people treat you like a servant.
Ask Jesus to give you a heart to serve people. Follow Jesus as leader. A servant Lord calls for a servant church. Jesus who is Lord over all is also servant of all.

Second, action. Decide on an action step you will take in serving Jesus this summer. Take an inventory of the people in your life—family, neighbors, school friends or business associates. Who can you serve? Mother Teresa often spoke of loving and serving the one right in front of you.

Be creative about it. Write a note of appreciation to someone. Do a household chore without being asked. Visit an elderly person. Make a meal for someone or host someone in your home. Offer to watch your friend’s kids. Run an errand for someone. Text a friend to ask how you can pray for them. Send an encouraging email to someone who is facing hard times. Forgive someone. Go through your closet and give away what you don’t wear. Give someone your undivided attention by putting away your cell phone. Send flowers. Thank a teacher.

Go to the hall after worship and learn how you can help with our belong! mission. We need people to help with jobs, transportation, nutrition, caring for children and construction. We need grill masters, social workers and grant writers. The last week in July, we will sponsor a combination Vacation Bible School and academic enrichment for underserved youth.
Consider your service to Christ through this church. We need people with a heart for hospitality. We need people who can read to children. We need a photographer for Vacation Bible School in July. We need Sunday school teachers. We need people to help us with money management. Let me count the ways.

Don’t walk out of here today without deciding what you can do in serving Christ this summer. Write June 10, 2018 in the margin of your Bible next to this Luke 22 passage to remind you of your new resolve. Write a note to yourself about what you are intending to do and post it somewhere. Tell the person you came with today or someone in your pew what you are willing to do in service for others.

I close worship each Sunday with the same benediction. I’ve said it so many times some of you know it by heart. “Love the Lord and Love the people. Serve the Lord and serve the people.” Love the Lord. Love the people. Serve the Lord. Serve the people.