

Memorize & Ponder

**Brentwood Presbyterian Church
July 14, 2013**

Servant Leadership

**Matt 20:25B-28 & Ps 82
(214, 655, 590, 635)**

Matthew is a contentious sort of guy.

He tells the story of Jesus with an edge,
almost with an axe to grind.

His legitimate concern,
the value that is in danger of being violated by what he's against,
is the integrity of the Christian message.

Matthew insists that his readers
understand what is distinctive
about Jesus way of being the Christ long-expected by the Jewish people.
He also takes pains to point out the differences
between Christianity and the dominant Gentile cultures of his era.

Losing a sense of what's distinctive, what's unique,
about the Christian faith
is always a danger.

It's built into the dynamic of being a Christian in a particular culture,
or cultures, as is the case for many of us here at Brentwood.

We follow a God made flesh,
a God who chose to become human in a particular time and place,
in order to fulfill a covenant with a particular people
and expand the benefits of that covenant to all peoples.

Christians are called to make the Gospel speak to our ages and place,
to connect with the values and needs of our times and locales,
to communicate to their neighbours
the benefits of God's grace in Jesus Christ
in compelling and compassionate ways.

In order to do that, in our day as in Mathew's day,
we try to put into words the sense and meaning
revealed by God in the presence and impact of Jesus Christ.

Finding the words that point faithfully to the unique grace
everyone is offered in Jesus Christ

is not easy, nor is it to be taken lightly.
It's not unlike trying to find words to express the feelings
that go into our marriage vows.
We can never capture them completely in words.
We can only point to the depth and breadth
of connections and attachment that we feel
in every fibre of our beings.
Poets and songwriters probably come the closest,
but even they are only pointing to a reality that transcends our language.

This is what Matthew is trying to do for the first generation of Christians.
He's trying to find words to point to the unique grace of God
that the first disciples experienced in their time with Jesus.
He's trying to find words to make sense of the life and witness
Jesus inspired and equipped them to pursue
as his continuing presence among the peoples and cultures of the world.

He is witnessing himself to what authentic Christian faith is like,
what following Jesus with integrity means.

And in this morning's passage, he talks about leadership.

I've been down in Halifax for the last couple of weeks
exploring with a wonderful group of theological students
what leadership in today's church looks like,
especially if we thought about in dialogue with jazz.

Throughout these past two weeks,
I've been reflecting on this text
and the sermon that the Spirit was provoking me to preach on it with you.

The contrast, as is often the case with Matthew, is stark.
Leadership among the Gentiles is often 'lording it over.'
It is coercive command and control.
"Do this" without any questions.
"I am the Lord and you will obey."
Leadership among Christians, Matthew says,
should be 'servitude' and 'slavery.'

"Wait a minute," I kept saying to the Spirit over the past couple of weeks.
Given that choice, I'm strongly inclined to choose the former.
I'm not sure those are the only two options for leading,
but given the choice, ...

And, as so often happens in conversation with the Spirit in these texts,
as we memorize and ponder them over the weeks,

first impressions and impulses are challenged and changed.

I think Matthew is dead on in condemning coercive leadership.

It just doesn't work.

It pushes people away.

It demotivates them.

It disempowers them,

to the point that they simply disengage in any meaningful way beyond conformity to get paid, or whatever other benefit may be involved.

But this stuff about leadership as servitude and slavery is really too much.

Until you begin to dig a bit deeper

and see it in the light of the example that Jesus sets.

It's not slavish servility to another human being

that Matthew is getting at here.

It's the profound sense of accountability

to a divine presence that desires beyond anything else your well-being.

That's what Matthew is pointing to with this contrast.

True Christian leadership arises from an overwhelming sense

of being accountable to a power that desires *Shalom* or well-being

for the whole of the creation.

That creation is not ours.

It was and is being created by God for good purposes.

We are stewards, servants, even slaves,

in the service of God's intent for this wonderful experiment called creation.

That's the kind of leadership Matthew is pointing to here.

Use all of your God-given gifts to nourish things to flourish

wherever you go and whatever you do.

And let's remember also that we are all in leadership.

Leadership of this type is influential, not positional.

It doesn't depend on where you are in the hierarchy of the organization.

Perhaps that's another brilliant insight from Matthew's way of talking about it.

Whatever your position, even in the most servile of positions,

you can be a dignified influence that nourishes people to flourish

in the grace of Jesus Christ.

That is the essence of the kind of servant leadership

we are called to and equipped for in Jesus Christ.

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