



September 19, 2021

Twenty Fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Jesus said to them, "If anyone wishes to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all." Mark 9:35

Dear Friends;

An organization called One Hope developed a leadership training curriculum to develop leaders among high school students. The program was tested in Ghana. Before the course was taught a group of the teenage participants were asked to complete a survey. One question that was asked was "Do you want to become a leader?" Before going through the curriculum 95 percent of the respondents answered no. Their opinions of leaders and leadership were negative because the students had observed corrupt and coercive leaders taking from others rather than giving to others. Their leaders didn't care about them so they didn't care to become leaders.

However, taking the course in leadership shifted their opinions. Afterward, when asked the same question, 85 percent of the students responded yes, they want to be leaders. Why the shift? They were taught that leadership is about helping people, giving people value and using influence to improve their community. That was something of which they wanted to have a part.

In today's passage from the Gospel of Mark, for a second time Jesus is preparing them for his impending death. They were having trouble understanding what exactly he meant. They were simple people who were suffering under the domination of the Roman Empire. They were also intimidated by their haughty religious authorities who made faith ever more complicated and inscrutable. This ensured the elite had wealth and job security. The disciples' experience was of self-serving people who held positions of power but no moral authority or true leadership. For the disciples, competition and struggles for power were easier to grasp.

Rather than rely on the coercive force of empire and state sanctioned religion, Jesus relied on an authority expressed in love. He aimed at empowering others and bringing people together. Jesus only relied on the attractiveness of love that he embodied. This was/is so contrary to how the world works that it can be difficult for us to understand. And it also frightened the disciples because they knew that those in powerful positions, whose first instinct is taking care of their own advancement, will be threatened by Jesus' style of servant leadership.

In our second reading from the Letter of James, the author is speaking to a community divided and in conflict. James appeals to humility, service and hospitality as qualities of those who follow Christ. He urges all to work for the common good for all people.

One commentator on today's readings says that Religious leaders should heed the words of Jesus and promote the common good, be humble, serve others, and welcome all people into the faith community. Lamentably many of our priests and bishops have not been models of humility, service or hospitality. Often they seem to prefer a church that more resembles the coercive force of empire than the persuasive force of love modeled by Jesus.

Some leaders are obsessed with policing religious practice and who should have access to the Eucharist. They emphasize all types of personal unworthiness rather than help people to draw together in the healing power of the body of Christ. Many seek to isolate and exclude rather than welcome, as in condemnatory statements of LGBTQ people. Is this not the kind of behaviors that cause so many to walk away? It is this poor leadership that has contributed to lack of young people wanting to join the ranks of leadership in the Church. We are all called to embody the kindness and compassion of the Gospel. And when our leaders fail it is important for the rest of us to create the Church we hope to see, built not on exclusion but on love.

Peace,

Ft Ron