

Servant Leadership

Deuteronomy 1:12-18

Mark 10:35-45

What do the Salt Lake City Public Schools, the Democratic National Committee, computer manufacturer Acer, Department of Defense contractor EWA and beer maker Molson/Coors have in common? They have all been the victims of ransomware attacks in 2021. In a ransomware attack, computer hackers break into private computer networks and install code that freezes access to data until a ransom has been paid. On May 7, 2021, a Russian hacking gang inserted ransomware into the computer systems of Colonial Pipeline. The code prevented the operation of a network of pipelines that deliver much of the Southeast's gasoline. One day later, on May 8th, the company paid a ransom of \$5 million. The hackers removed the ransomware and the system resumed working.

“Ransom (n), a consideration paid or demanded for the release of someone or something from captivity.” So says the Merriam-Webster Dictionary. In the Colonial Pipeline case, a \$5 million ransom released the gasoline. In the case of Jesus, he paid his life to release us from the consequences our sins would otherwise exact upon “many”. So he predicted at the end of the testy conversation with his disciples we just read in the Gospel of Mark. But we have jumped to its conclusion. It deserves a deeper examination. In this, the shortest Gospel, chapter ten means Jesus has nearly

reached Jerusalem for the final time. His passion has drawn near and he has told his followers about it three times. They have failed to understand. Spectacularly.

Brothers James and John approach Jesus and ask to be placed at the positions of highest honor “in your glory”. He has told them he will suffer and die, but also, “and after three days the Son of Man will rise.” By now they understand that Jesus used the Old Testament prophetic phrase Son of Man to refer to himself. Literally the child of a human being, Mary, Jesus also referred to himself as the Son of the Father, of God. Latching onto this promise of power, they hear only the part about him rising from the dead. “When you come back,” they say in so many words, “put us up on thrones of our own, right beside yours.”

The little word “But” that introduces Jesus reply packs a punch in the Greek. It might better be translated as, “Ain't no way!” We need to hear the exasperation in his voice when Jesus says, “You do not know what you are asking.” He wonders whether they could drink the cup he must drink and accept the baptism with which he must get baptized. Commentator William Lane writes, “In the Old Testament the cup of wine is a common metaphor for the wrath of God's judgment on human sin.” In first century Palestine that sense of the metaphor had gained the added weight of utter, complete guilt. To “drink my cup” was to be found guilty of the same offenses I have committed. And baptism here symbolizes death. One weakness of our sprinkling baptisms is they fail to convey this sense of dying and rising, which is one of baptism's deepest meanings. We die to sin and rise to life. John the Baptist performed the rite in the

River Jordan where this would have been dramatized by immersion in the water and then a return to a standing position.

James and John blithely answer yes, they can drink that cup and get baptized in that way. The text does not force us to conclude they still do not understand. But it seems highly likely they still have their eyes fixed on glory—glory for themselves. Jesus tells them they will indeed drink his cup and suffer his baptism. He means they also will suffer and die for the Gospel whether they understand him or not. Making it sound like he is granting them this as some kind of boon, he adds that he cannot grant their seats of honor request. These are for “those for whom it has been prepared.” Those seats are already taken. God has already ordained their occupants, whoever they may be. Mark understands it all. Writing some thirty to forty years later, during a great persecution of Christians at the hands of the Romans, Mark understands about suffering and death and life and glory.

Mark also tells us the other disciples learn about James' and John's play for glory. They become indignant—though not because they understand Jesus any better. No, they are jealous of position and sorry they did not think to ask first. So Jesus calls them all together and tells them the Christian community will operate under topsy-turvy rules. Whereas Gentile rulers “lord it over them”, among their fellowship servant leadership will be the norm. Whoever would be first must become the slave of all. He concludes with another oblique reference to himself as the Son of Man, who came not to be served but to serve, ***and to give his life as a ransom for many.***”

Jesus makes himself an example for us to follow. To serve, not rule; to give, not take. The imagery of the ransom for many comes straight from Isaiah 53, one of the Suffering Servant poems sprinkled across that prophet's book. The Servant was despised and rejected, his pain so great it disfigured his face. Like a lamb going silently to a slaughter it does not see coming, the Servant will die. Like a sin offering placed on a fiery altar, his body will pay for the sins of the people. Who can say what or when or how Isaiah imagined this vision coming true in time and space? We can say what Jesus saw in it. He saw himself as that Suffering Servant. By calling himself the ransom payer he makes this clear. He knew he would pay the price.

This conversation Jesus had with his disciples should cause at least two reactions in us. First, we must feel the deepest gratitude for the grace of God. We all sin. Therefore his ransom was paid for all of us, freely and voluntarily. Second, he has made himself an example to follow. He has made himself a servant/slave and we are to do the same. Thankful for having been set free from a deadly fate we richly deserve, we are to put others ahead of self. Even when surrounded by grasping power and money seekers who would gladly plant their cleats in our backs as they climb over us, we are to serve. To serve them, to serve the last and least, to serve our brothers and sisters in the church. To serve.

According to the written record in the four Gospels, the last shall be first and the first last was one of Jesus' most common themes. He must have meant it. And so in the church we want to put great emphasis on serving others as beloved brothers and

sisters. By serving one another we make the love of Christ tangible. We incarnate it. My years serving as a panel member on judicial commissions taught me that virtually every church that produced a case that appeared before us had a shared characteristic: the widespread pursuit of power in the fellowship. I also have found that the worst conflicts in churches I have served have always “featured” power contests. Arguments in churches are really not about what color the kitchen towels should be, nor even how much to allocate to mission in the annual budget. They are about who gets to decide. They are about power.

But rather than telling a juicy story about an abuse of leadership in a church, I want to lift up examples of those sincerely trying to serve others as followers of the Suffering Servant. Either I personally witnessed each or somebody I trust told me about them. I have changed all the names.

John served as the National Director of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. Working in a major sports town, he could get tickets for any game or match, even playoff games with seats at a premium. But John did not use those tickets himself. Nor did he give them to powerful people he was trying to cultivate as donors and/or board members. He gave them instead to special needs children and their families. He got their names from a Christian school that offered special education programs.

Ellen belonged to a wealthy and connected family in a town where most all of the leading citizens were related to each other. But instead of passing her time at

country club brunches she quietly, almost secretly sought out people down on their luck. She was very specific in her search terms. She wanted to find “Good people whom life has slapped down. People who will keep trying if they get some help.” And she would give them a thousand dollars. Not lend, give, in the early 1990's when a grand went a bit farther than it does today. All the pastors knew about it. Precious few others did, probably including her husband.

Ronaldo, a Presbyterian pastor, developed a curriculum on servant leadership, taught it at each church he served, and went to radical lengths to live it out. He left behind a string of churches with empowered elders. I understand something like that happened here, with a different methodology, a decade ago. In fact, we could find a number of examples of servant leadership here at Central. We are not perfect, but trust me, we are on the healthy side of the church spectrum. I have witnessed few power plays in the nearly three years I have been here. When I ask elders how they would like me to do something, easily the most common answer I get is, “However you would like to do it.” I recognize this latitude has limits, as it should. But as the Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians, I would exhort us all to continue in this good start we have made. Let us continue to serve one another.

Jesus gave his life as a ransom for many, including we who believe in him as the Son of Man and Son of God. Follow his example. Serve one another in his name. This will promote the peace and unity of the church and it will make his love a tangible, powerful force in and through this congregation. Be the servant of all.