

Servant Leaders

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Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I. Send me” (Isaiah 6:8).

Picture, by way of contrast, these two visions of what it means to draw near to the kingdom of God.

In the first vision, Jesus’ disciples ask, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” You get the sense that this is not some deep theological inquiry into the nature of spirituality or virtue. No, these disciples just want to know what status looks like in heaven. They wonder how you can tell how well you’re doing—what’s your class rank, or your place in the social hierarchy. The question comes up more than once among the disciples, and in one story the mother of James and John asks Jesus for special seating arrangements in her own kind of celestial Game of Thrones. She wants her boys to be seated to the right and left of Jesus himself, the places of highest honor in the kingdom of heaven.

On the other hand, consider Isaiah’s vision of heaven. He sees the Lord, sitting on a throne, high and lifted up. The hem of his robe fills the temple, and he’s surrounded by six-winged seraphim, who call out to one another, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the earth is full of his glory.” While some of Jesus’ disciples want to know their own prospects for glory, Isaiah sees only the glory of God. His response is the only one that makes any sense in the presence of the Almighty. He bows down and says, “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of

hosts!” What overwhelms Isaiah is the awareness of how far he falls short of the glory of God.

Now see what happens, first to Jesus’ disciples and then to Isaiah. Jesus calls a little child out of the crowd. He puts the child in the midst of the big people and he says to the grownups, “Unless you change and become like children, you won’t get anywhere near the kingdom of heaven. Where I come from, those who are humble are thought to be the greatest. So don’t despise these little ones, or anyone else like them. Their angels see the face of God in heaven.”

Meanwhile, Isaiah, bowed down before the presence of God, sees one of the seraphim coming toward him. The seraph holds a burning coal to Isaiah’s lips, and the coal is hot enough to melt a man’s sins away. “Now your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out,” the angel declares. Whatever made Isaiah unworthy has been taken away, not by his own efforts but by the grace of God. Now he can stand before God unafraid and unashamed. And then, when God wants a prophet to call people back from their sin and guilt and vanity and pride, the voice from the throne asks, “Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?” And Isaiah, newly freed and forgiven, can respond to God’s call: “Here am I. Send me.”

The disciples of Jesus and the prophet Isaiah all find their way into God’s service, but each of them first has to receive what they need by way of preparation. The disciples need to be brought down a bit and humbled, while Isaiah needs to be lifted up and encouraged. God gives to each exactly what he needs, and then—forgiven, loved, and

freed—they find their calling to whatever it is that God would have them do. They all become leaders eventually, but only after they become servants first, because that’s the way God works. Jesus himself says that he came not to be served but to serve, and if anyone wants to follow him, that person needs to become a servant, too.

We joke—but it’s only half a joke—when we say that a healthy sense of incompetence is actually a prerequisite for serving as a minister of the Word and Sacrament, or a ruling elder, or a deacon in the life of the church. If anyone responds to the Nominating Committee by saying, “Of course I was expecting your call, on account of my superior gifts and spiritual abilities,” the committee members are instructed to say, “I’m sorry, I must have the wrong number,” and then hang up. Boasting and vanity and clamoring after status may be natural impulses among worldly folk, but those are not the values of the kingdom of heaven. If you’re going to be a leader in God’s realm you’d better have a servant’s heart. You’d better have the mind that was in Christ Jesus, who did not count equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself and poured himself out for the sake of his people.

I watched a Netflix series recently called *The Crown*. It’s very well done and tells the story of young Queen Elizabeth II, who succeed to the throne at the tender age of 25—a young woman surrounded by distinguished older men, including Winston Churchill, all of whom had strong ideas about status and hierarchy and the way things ought to be done. One of the great metaphors of the series is that the crown is heavy, and whoever wears it has to grow into it, finding the grace and strength of character to wear it wisely

and well. The actress who plays Elizabeth says it was a challenging role, because the young queen grows and changes so much over time, as she learns to bear the weight of her crown.

The image of a crown is a thoroughly biblical one, even for us ordinary mortals. The psalmist, for example, contemplates the majesty of God and then he asks, “What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them little lower than God and crowned them with glory and honor.” And again the psalmist says, “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits—who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy....”

In the vision of Revelation, at the very end of the Bible, the one on the throne says, “Be faithful until death and I will give you the crown of life.” It’s a mark of the Holy Spirit’s work among us that most people don’t seek to serve in and through the church for the sake of some new status or any kind of crown. And yet the metaphor remains a good one. Paul says that you and I are heirs of God’s kingdom, fellow heirs as brothers and sisters of Christ. We were made to inherit the kingdom of heaven, but in order to do that, we have to grow into the crown; that is, we have to find the humility that will make us strong, and the grace that can make us good.

Some people have to be brought down a bit before they find their calling, while others need to be lifted up and encouraged. Still others just need to be given a chance to use the gifts God has already given them.

I saw another movie this weekend that I highly recommend. It's called *Hidden Figures*, and it's based on a true story about three very bright young African American women who are friends. The film portrays how each of them finds an important way to contribute to the beginnings of America's space program in the early 1960s. It's an inspiring story, and uplifting in ways that all of us need these days, when there's so much conflict and bitterness and antagonism over things that threaten to divide us. Not incidentally, part of the community these young women share, and a great source of their strength and support, comes from the church they all belong to and worship in together.

The world needs leaders today at every level of our lives. We need them in our families, we need them in the church, we need them in our local community, and we need them in the nation. We need leaders who are strong, but whose strength comes not from self-serving vanity, but from the compassion and grace and courage of a servant leader's heart.

God has given each of us the gifts we need, but God spreads those gifts among us so that no one person or group of people has them all, and so we'll recognize how among the things we need the most are the gifts that other people contribute to our common good.

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds,” Paul says, “so that you may discern what is the will of God.” And in case there's any doubt about what that means, Paul goes on to say, “Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what

is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Don't lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit; serve the Lord."

That's our common calling together, for each of us according to the gifts God has given us. And whatever God calls us to do, God will equip us to do it—because that brings glory to God, and it brings to all of us our deepest joy.