

## Called to Be Servant Leaders

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Over the last several weeks there have been several themes that have been running through our gospel passages.

1. Jesus saying, "I'm going to Jerusalem and they are going to kill me."
2. Welcome the children, with children being a metaphor for the last and least.
3. That the last shall be first and the first shall be last. Those who wish to lead must be the slave of all.

This week we hear that final message again, but now in a context of James and John, the sons of Zebedee asking for places of honor in the coming kingdom. Then the other ten get their noses bent out of shape because of this request. These two are not just asking for earthly prominence, but a prominent place in heaven. This does seem pretty arrogant or presumptuous. One does wonder if the other disciples were angry because it never occurred to them to ask for this type of favor. In Matthew the mother of sons of Zebedee makes the request, but the harsh rebuke is the same. Whether the boys made this request or mom made the request this passage shows up in all three of the synoptic gospels. That tells us something important about the story.

The second year students in the EfM class this work were studying different types of biblical criticism (study techniques). One of the questions that can be examined in any passage is why was this passage retained? Why is this sharp criticism of the disciples not only retained by Mark, but by the other two? Are the three evangelists reacting to a situation in the early church where a stern and rather direct teaching by Jesus was needed? One cannot possibly have recorded everything Jesus taught, said or did so some sorting of material had to take place. So an editorial decision to include this scene was made by all three writers.

Any serious student of church history will realize quickly that this group of disciples did not miraculously become a happy unified group of followers after the resurrection. A careful reading of the book of Acts will quickly prove that church fights about doctrine and leadership began shortly after Jesus rose from the grave. This leads me to suspect that there was probably a leadership issue in the early church that the gospel writers were addressing and used the words of Jesus to make their point. We have some leadership issues of our own in today's church to which this passage is relevant.

First of all there is a question I would like to ask all of you. Who is the head of the Church? The head of the church is not the Presiding Bishop, the Archbishop of

Canterbury, the Pope or any human being. The head of the church is Jesus Christ. Many students in a first year intro to religious studies class that Wendy taught at a Jesuit college would get that question wrong on a regular basis. Sometimes our church leaders also get this wrong.

A great deal of unpleasantness in church life over the millennia has centered on this question so this passage is as relevant today as it was in the first century and every century in between. When jealousy and power struggles gain ground in a church we are all in trouble. Some of the current unpleasantness in our own church and in Christianity in general surrounds the issue of power. Who gets to interpret the bible? Who gets to decide who is in and who is out are just two of the questions that face not only those of us in the Episcopal Church, but in all churches in Christendom.

One part of our structure in the Episcopal Church that causes misunderstanding among others in the Anglican Communion world wide is the nature of our leadership structure. Many in other parts of the world cannot understand why our Presiding Bishop just does not tell the bishops and churches, this is what we are going to do. In most of the world, the archbishop of a country has that kind of power. He and it is always a he in these cases, can depose a bishop or priest just because they disagree with each other.

What is unique in our church is that the Presiding Bishop is truly the first among equals. For most of our history, the office of the Presiding Bishop only existed during our triennial General Convention. The Presiding Bishop was the bishop who presided over the convention and that office began and ended with convention. The PB was always just another bishop of a diocese who at the end of convention went back to being the bishop of a diocese. The office of the Presiding Bishop became a permanent position in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I have met two of our Presiding Bishops and both of them understand what Jesus was talking about when he talks of servant leadership.

In fact the best teaching about servant leadership comes from Bishop Bennett Sims the retired bishop of Atlanta. His book on Servanthood begins with this very gospel passage as the instructions for how we should all be leaders in the church.

Bishop Hollerith spent some time over the last few weeks traveling around the diocese meeting with delegates for council. In meeting with the Executive Board which I serve on as the clergy representative from our convocation, the Bishop decided to have a series of meetings rather than one large pre-council meeting. The idea behind this was that he could engage in dialogue with small groups in the diocese and truly engage in an exchange of ideas and answer questions.

During those meeting he shared with us his understanding of the leadership role of the bishop and I am sure that he has read Bishop Sims' book. I thought this was so well done that I wanted to take today to share just a bit of that. Jesus would be

appalled at the hierarchical structure of most churches today. If you see any hierarchy in today's gospel, please show it to me for I do not find it. Bishop Holly stated that he does not see the diocese as a pyramid structure with the bishop on the top, then a small diocesan staff, followed by clergy and finally getting to the people at the bottom. Holly's vision of our diocesan structure is that of a wagon-wheel. The bishop is at the hub, where the axle would go through and is connected to the congregations by the spokes that go out to the wheel. We the congregations surround the bishop who serves to connect us all together. This does not make his position any more important, but the function is different that those of us on the rim. The diocese serves to connect the parishes so that the ministry of the Church can roll on.

Now I would like to take that out to our parish and talk about how I view leadership. This is especially appropriate right now as we engage in our stewardship campaign and I prepare for some enforced "vacation." I want to call back to your minds something I wrote in the letter to the congregation where I told you about my diagnosis with cancer.

I closed the letter with the following statement. "How can you help? By being the parish God has called you to be and keep doing what you are doing! You are the ministers of the church. Your ministry is what makes St. Aidan's great." You see we too look like that wagon-wheel. I am at the center that connects all the ministries that you the people of St. Aidan's are engaged in. I also then help connect us with the diocese as both rector and member of Executive Board. However, even that connection is more than just me, for we have our delegates to council where all decisions of the diocese are made.

This idea of servant leadership is at the heart of our baptismal theology. In the catechism of the church we state that we are all ministers. That is the reason I am referred to as a priest rather than a minister. My role is one of a sacramental minister. The title priest sets that ministry off as unique, but also just one of many. You are the ministers of St. Aidan's, not me. Your ministry takes a wide variety of shapes and natures. Some are more obvious than others, but whenever you minister in God's name you are serving in the baptismal calling to be a minister of the gospel.

The vestry has often talked about an organizational chart for the parish. I have been reflecting on why that has not happened even though we keep talking about it. Part of me says, trying to organize all of you is the like the proverbial herding of cats. In reflecting on today's gospel I realized that most organizational charts focus on a hierarchy and structure that does not and should not work in a healthy parish! I am beginning to think that it is a good thing that we have not been able to do this. This represents a dynamic, active, healthy parish where new ministries are constantly springing up.

So as I look at some enforced time off, I am absolutely confident that you will all continue to be St. Aidan's, because I am not St. Aidan's you are. You are the ministers, the leaders of this parish. I am simply honored to serve you as your priest.