

# Leadership and Service

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**Third Presbyterian Church**  
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**Mark 10:35-45**

The topic is leadership, and service, our call to be leaders and servants, not whether, but how.

You've often heard that there is no such thing as a bad question, or, the only bad question is the one that is not asked. In general that's true, especially if you are either a teacher or student trying to learn, and not asking would stifle that effort.

On the other hand, we get a version of a bad question this morning, offered up by Jesus' disciples, who so often stand in as our surrogates. Two disciples, as we've just heard, brothers, James and John, come to Jesus. I often wonder how that worked, this group of twelve, plus we presume many others, traveling from village to village as a kind of movable community. How did it work?

Clearly, there were clusters, or cliques, or something, because these two, James and John, had been having some kind of sidebar conversation. They sidle up to Jesus. "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." It's not unlike when a child asks a parent to do something. "What?" the parent asks. "Just say yes and then I will tell you," the child responds. Do whatever we ask of you, they said. "And he said to them, 'What is it you want me to do for you?'"

Again, I would have loved to have been present for all of this. I would love to have witnessed the tone, the facial expressions, the postures, both of the two disciples and Jesus himself. You get the sense that he is tolerating them, but we don't really understand the full extent. "And they said to him, 'Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.'"

So that's the bad question, a request of Jesus that is problematic on so many levels. On one level, they are seeking to take the place of honor on the disciple team. It's like a teammate requesting to be the captain or a colleague jockeying for position at work or more to the point a child asking a parent to name them the favorite of all the children. That's on one level.

At a deeper level, there are even bigger problems. "But Jesus said to them, 'You do not know what you are asking.'" Jesus then asks them if they are prepared to face what he will face. Though they have no idea what that means, they readily say yes. Jesus had repeatedly been

forecasting his death, but these two, if not all twelve, if not all of his followers, still do not understand. They will not, until quite later, when it all comes to a head.

In the meantime, this power grab is not met well. The other ten are angry, we hear. Jesus senses this, and lays it all out for them, why the question, the request, misses the mark, and what a better, alternative question might have been. In the culture out there, Jesus says, rulers, leaders, lord their power over people. “(T)heir great ones are tyrants over them,” Jesus reminds them. But listen to what he says: “But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

So the question, dear James and John, was not whether you could occupy the top spot in my org. chart, but how can you, with humility, do just the opposite. How can you serve? How can you take what you are learning from me, experiencing with me, and live it out in a life of service? How can what you call greatness become what I call greatness, a transformed life that works for the transformation of all? How can your leadership become synonymous with service, rather than a quest for power and prestige? Those were the questions then and they are the questions now, in our economics, in our politics, certainly in the church.

I don't know about you, but every day these days I decide about how deeply to connect with the news. I so badly want to know, need to know, what is going on in the world so I can be a faithful and informed citizen. But at the same time, there are days when the news seems so overwhelmingly troubling that I want to bury my head and ignore it all.

Perhaps you remember a short stretch of time this summer when that was the case. Four people, prominent people, died in succession, inviting me to ask the question of what a servant leader might look like.

- Senator John McCain, whose distinguished life story in military and political service is well known, a so-called maverick.
- Aretha Franklin, a different kind of leader, to be sure, one who used her own particular and spectacular gift not only to entertain, but to inspire, and to advance in her way a conversation about race in America.
- Kofi Annan, the former general secretary of the United Nations, who reminded us in his calling of the importance of global issues, including from Africa, our interconnectivity in an increasingly complex and fractured world.
- And to a different extent, the playwright Neil Simon, using his cultural popularity, his gifts, to entertain and to place images and themes in our consciousness, including the indelible notion of the “odd couple.”

These four well-known people died within just a few days of each other. In fact, Aretha Franklin's funeral was on a Friday and John McCain's on a Saturday. I watched them both. Perhaps you did as well. Stevie Wonder sang at Aretha's and Renee Fleming at Senator McCain's. I thought if I could have both of them sing at my funeral, plus Bruce Springsteen, of course, well that would be newsworthy!

I thought of them, these four, whose lives unfolded in very different ways, but who all were clearly given gifts, and used them, not always perfectly, but fully, and not always selflessly, but enough so that they impacted us, and their world, in positive ways.

As I was processing all of this news, other news came out, about leadership, and power. At Ohio State, the football team I root for, a controversy was brewing about a former assistant coach and allegations of domestic violence, and the role of the coach and athletic director, men with great power, compensated well, and what their response should have been. It was about college sports, of course, but about so much more than that. Some were calling for the dismissal of the coach and A.D., while others were calling for no punishment at all. In the end, mild suspensions were handed out, and I am not sure what has been learned.

At the very same time all of this was happening, we were learning the deeply unsettling news from the Roman Catholic Church, allegations of hundreds and hundreds of instances of sexual abuse, and efforts to cover it up. The narrative is still playing itself out, even to the halls of the Vatican, with resignation of cardinals and questions even about the church's viability.

Through it all, the lives and deaths of well-known people, scandal and controversy in sports and religion, the voices of James and John echo in my head, and their question, and Jesus's response. What do we do with the power we have been given, people in high places and people in the places you and I occupy? How can our leadership look like leadership that serves rather than consumes and acquires?

I hear a lot of sermons growing up, and truth be told, don't remember many of them. That's both refreshing and humbling, seeing that I do what I do. But I remember a sermon my dad preached comparing Roberto Clemente, of all people, and Howard Hughes, again, of all people. Both given gifts, both presented with opportunities. Hughes acquired and acquired. Roberto Clemente, the great Puerto Rican and Pittsburgh Pirate right fielder, lost his life in service to his people.

I remember that sermon, gratefully.

Now, I understand who you and I are and who we are not. We are not John McCain, or Aretha Franklin, or Kofi Annan or Neil Simon. We are not Howard Hughes or Roberto Clemente. But THEY ARE NOT US, either. We are not James or John.

Here is who we are. We are followers of Jesus, given a call, given gifts, given leadership opportunities (whether we know it or not or believe it or not), given POWER, even. And we are given choices, our own versions of the question asked of Jesus so long ago. And the answer, even after 2000 years, remains precisely the same. You are great when you serve. You lead when you serve, humbly. You are first when you are last. Remember that, and your soul will be happier and healthier, and the world will be too. Amen.