

Homily – Servant Leadership

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For the past week, ever since we had our Annual Meeting, I have been thinking on the topic of servant leadership. You may recall that I thanked our three retiring Vestry members, Melissa, Steve, and Kris. They have been servant leaders, and in general I have to say that I am very grateful for those who serve on our Vestry. I am grateful for those who serve our community, as we try to be the hands and feet and voice of Jesus here in the South County. As we serve together, I wonder what new things we will embrace, and I wonder what old things we will keep doing.

Like a lot of the roles that we have here at St. Barnabas we have a job description for what it means to be a vestry member. One of the qualities called out is a willingness to be a servant leader. We are not hierarchal. Vestry members are not here to exercise power and control. We are here to serve each other, and we highly value servant leadership.

Our Sr. Warden and Jr. Warden are the two vestry members that are called into Vestry leadership roles. Their job description highlights the following characteristic. Our leaders must have an ability to "check one's ego at the door," And, our leaders must be a servant of the people without a need to be the "most important person" in the congregation or to be the one with the right answers to everything. I know from my own personal experience in trying to be a servant leader, that it is wonderfully rewarding, but sometimes I stumble and get it wrong. Sometimes my ego gets in the way, and the best thing to do is to be mindful that the ego is dominating again, and try to be better the next time. God, heal me from my ego, and while you are at it heal all of us from our egos. Wouldn't that be nice. Heal us from our egos.

Now, today's gospel reading, like last week's gospel reading, is about healing, healing from sickness, diseases and those things that possess us. I shared last week, that I have no clue what is meant by unclean spirits, whether it is physical sickness, mental ailment, or trauma held in the body. Be that as it may, over and over again, Jesus sees the many who have had their lives disrupted. He has compassion, and he heals them. I know that when I have been healed from things that afflict me, I am grateful. I am grateful to the nurses, aides, and doctors. I am grateful for medicines and medical technology. I am grateful for medical insurance, and I thank God. Thank you God for healing.

And, in today's Gospel reading the first person healed is not given a name but she is Simon's mother-in-law. We heard read, "Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He, Jesus, came and took her by the hand

and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.” This story is a little problematic, for in twenty-first century America, our first reaction to this story is to recognize how patriarchal and misogynistic it is. Let’s heal the one woman, so that she can serve the men.

Now there are other parts of the healing we can also focus on. First, the reaction of the woman to her healing was to serve. She models something outstanding for us. When we are healed, or blessed, or given a gift by God, then our first reaction should be to serve God and others. Actually we should use any excuse to serve for service helps us get outside ourselves, it helps to dampen our self-centeredness, the opposite of love. It changes our hearts for the better, and it changes the world for the better. Last week when I was having coffee with a newcomer to St. Barnabas, I was asked about the strengths of our church community. I think one of the primary strengths is the breadth of folks who step up to serve and volunteer. Most churches I have been a part of have about ten percent of the folks who get things done. However, here at St. Barnabas I think it is about forty percent of folks who serve in ministry. Last week in our Annual Meeting packet we listed our ministries and our ministry leaders. There were a lot of names listed. And those names are just the leads of each ministry. Many of you participate in ministries without needing to lead. And, to that end, one of my favorite spiritual gifts is the gift of helping. These are the people who are always asking how they can help. Thank you God for all the people who help at St. Barnabas. I trust that as you help your hearts are lifted by serving God and others.

Three years ago during Covid, I remember that my mother made an interesting point about service. She said that one of the things she regretted about Covid is that it was harder to serve. In the past, she served in a variety of ways at her church, at her local hospital, and with the community theater group. However, serving God and others was not as easy during Covid, was it? But maybe you noticed, during Covid, that the nature of serving changed. Serving had become the little things. The phone call, the postcard, all the other ways that we connect and say “I see you to one another.” Meaningful service is saying “you are still part of my life, and I hope I am part of yours.” I wonder if part of the stir crazy feeling we had during Covid was due to the changes in our opportunities to serve God and others. But we found new ways to serve, didn’t we? And, now that we are on the other side of Covid we still have the little ways to serve, and we are also back out in the community serving one another, sometimes in new ways. I would be curious to hear from you about how you feel your heart is being lifted by new ways of serving. Maybe that’s something we need to embrace as a church, all the new ways to serve God and others.

And here is a link between healing and serving that I want to explore with you. My dad used to tell the story about a bargain he made with God to heal my brother from

seizures. It must have worked for I don't remember my brother having seizures. I also don't remember what my dad told God he would start doing, but bargaining with God is something that I have done. I bet you have bargained as well. God if I get this job, then I will write a big check to the church. God, if you heal my loved one from cancer, then I will dedicate my life to serving the homeless. God if you give me more money I will spend it on serving you. We all have tried to make bargains with God, and if that is what is on your mind, then say it to God. Sometimes when I am praying aloud with someone, I will throw a bargain in. I thought it and God already knows it so why clean up my prayer. Instead, I should pray what is already on my heart.

However, we do not have a transactional God. We can't say the magic words, or do the magic deeds and God responds with beneficence. Jesus did not die on the Cross as a bargain. Jesus gave himself freely and with no strings attached. When I am in a bad place, I try to bargain with God. But, the better place is to see the blessings and healings that I already have from God, and not wait for something in the future before I start serving. Let me start now to give money to God. Let me begin now to serve the homeless, without getting what I want first. Jesus is calling us now, in the present, to serve God and others.

Now, a few chapters after this morning's Gospel reading, James and John are asking for the honor of sitting beside Jesus in glory. In response Jesus says the following. *"You've observed how godless rulers throw their weight around, and when people get a little power how quickly it goes to their heads. It's not going to be that way with you. Whoever wants to be great must become a servant. Whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave. That is what the Son of Man has done: He came to serve, not to be served—and then to give away his life in exchange for many who are held hostage."* Jesus calls us into a life of servant leadership. Jesus calls us to serve God and others.

Now, one of my favorite passages in the New Testament is the Apostle Paul's great servant song as found in his letter to the Philippians. Here is a portion of this servant song. *"Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross."* As his followers, this is the way of love towards which Jesus is calling us, self-giving, self-emptying, and humbleness. This is the light that is brought into the world by Jesus, and it is a light that is given to us freely so that we might share this light and love with others. Jesus calls us to serve God and others.

Now in addition to this servant song shared by the Apostle Paul, there are also four other servant songs that are found in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. In 600 BC, six centuries before the birth of Jesus, the Babylonians began a series of deportations of the leading families of Judea. The Hebrews were forcefully removed to foreign lands, and weren't allowed to begin returning home for about sixty years. The parts of the Book of Isaiah with the four servant songs was probably written during the exile. No one knows who the servant songs are written about. Christians read them and see Jesus. However, the writers of Isaiah may have also been saying that the Hebrew people, as a group, are the great servant.

During their exile it would make sense that the Hebrews became the servants, gardeners, and maids in the foreign lands. That is certainly what has happened to those that have come to America from other lands. Earlier parts of the Book of Isaiah say that the Hebrew people had become haughty and self-centered. They had focused on their own rights and privileges, and they had stopped taking care of the widow and the orphan. They had stopped following God's ways. Having their privileges removed with the exile certainly brought down the leading Hebrew families. Becoming the servants, gardeners and maids in a foreign land would have retaught them humility. And, it makes sense to me that the Hebrews in a foreign land would start lifting up the virtues of being a servant and writings songs about servants.

Maybe the necessary suffering of exile led the Hebrews to the death of the ego and the false self. There is deep spiritual benefit and value in being a servant. Instead of praying that we never be brought low, that we never become the servant, let us voluntarily become the servant. Let us serve God and others.

We don't know her name, but we know Simon's mother-in-law served. It is through serving that we model for others what it means to be a follower of Jesus. And, it is through serving that we change our own hearts and the hearts of others. Plus, it makes the world a better place. Choose to serve God and others.