

Unrest in the Ranks

- Mark 10:35-45; Hebrews 5:1-10; Job 38:1-7, 34-41
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This past week I had the good fortune to have lunch with Magda Armargos, our Ministers and Missionaries Benefit Board representative. In the wake of Brenda's death, Magda wanted to make sure I was doing OK. She wanted to assure me that MMBB was there to help me if I needed it.

Magda is a Cuban – American who is very committed to her church in New Jersey. She is also a very committed American Baptist. Our conversation was wide ranging, including our mutual lament that the unrest in American Baptist circles in the last several years had done so much damage to our confidence and potential as a denomination. In our analysis we concluded that people of differing points of view have lost the skill of dialogue. Just like the wider culture, even Christians smash opponents with condemnation and seek to remove the insecurity of other world views. Media and entertainment television have made it plain that the goal of voting people off the island or expelling them from the Big Brother house, or eliminating competitors from the bachelor and bachelorette shows takes cunning and artificial alliances. Dialogue, the ability to hold convictions while listening to the truths of others, is not only unpracticed, it is almost never observed in society.

I lamented to Magda that the label “liberal” has been drained of its meaning by those who have demonized the word as “extreme.” In truth, the initial use of the word “liberal” had to do with freedom of the spirit, not a political position. It was a combination of conscience and will; it pointed to living a good life and contributing to the morality of the community. I found myself elaborating more than necessary, but Magda was such an attentive listener – and she seemed to agree that dialogue might help more people to find a more welcoming spirit.

Since that conversation with Magda I have reflected on the fact that our church fits into a category of religious labeling that has all but lost its meaning in the uncivil climate of today's religious debates. We have stood in that noble tradition called “evangelical liberal.” This distinctive identity has been nearly lost to the culture wars wherein conservative equals all things good and liberal equals all things loose, void of morals and absent common sense. In fact, the liberal movement has pressed for a connection between belief and action. It has stressed an understanding of the doctrines about Jesus Christ while also pushing for an application of the Gospel to the whole of human life, not just the spirit. The tradition calls faithful Christians to develop a conscience for God as well as a consciousness about God.

My MMBB friend, Magda, would be pleased to know that over the years, this congregation – the First Baptist Church of Rochester – has had to deal with the great diversity of immigrant populations and religious expressions. Those who have gone before us here have had to deal with the issue of fair treatment of Native Americans, and all the wars of the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries, the movements to abolish slavery and to give women the vote, civil rights for African Americans, conservation and environmental concerns as industries in Rochester grew, and education for the populace (we helped establish the University of Rochester and Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School). The church has also been concerned about health care,

supporting health care movements in the community that led to the establishment of a variety of local hospitals and the predecessor to what is now the Fairport Baptist Homes.

All of this comes from a deeply centered faith in the love of God found in Jesus Christ, that unique and particular person who is so much like us and yet so very different. Consequently, we and our forebears have concluded that God uses human agents to raise the quality of life for all people as an expression of the Kingdom of God.

Yet, do we truly understand the meaning of service? This is the question that Herman Hesse addresses in his small essay *Journey to the East*. A group of prominent pilgrims head toward an undefined destination in “the east.” Their servant, Leo, is happy, pleasant, a discerning presence, and ever ready to support the group in its journey. Then, suddenly, Leo disappears. In his absence, this group of prominent religious pilgrims becomes dysfunctional and enters into disunity and unrest, each expecting the other to fill Leo’s role as servant. The group never reaches its destination. Instead, the group dissolves from the bitterness and strife. Only later does the narrator of the essay discover that Leo was actually the leader of the order that the group was going to visit. Both his exemplary presence as a servant and his disappearance were tests to determine if the group members understood faith and mutual service. They did not. They all failed.

Is this not the lesson of James and John? After three years they had become very good at emulating Jesus, but they had made neither the intellectual nor the spiritual leap to understand the world as Jesus did. Perhaps they had interpreted “first last, last first” as a metaphor for Israel’s ultimate triumph over the Roman oppressors. Whatever their understanding, they still had within them a sense of political positioning. “Do for us what we ask you.”

Jesus says to them that they have it all wrong. The first – last philosophy isn’t about power or position or rank. It is not about being orthodox, conservative, or liberal. In effect, Jesus says: You all know that in this world, on this earth, the kings, the dictators, the despots, the autocrats, and the totalitarians behave like tyrants. But, among you there has to be something quite different. And you have got to choose to be different! You have to choose to lead your life through service.

What do servant leaders look like?

They are people who embrace both the concept of serving others and serving Someone greater and beyond themselves. In a spiritual community no leader gets privilege. With the possible exception of pastors at church potlucks, no leader gets an EZ –Pass; no leader cuts in line; no leader gets in first or takes the best seat. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be a servant to all the rest. A true spiritual leader serves first, and by serving leads through example. Jesus cared less about how James and John and the other disciples felt about him than how the twelve of them were motivated to dignify the lives of all people.

Servant leaders are people who understand the importance of awareness, listening, empathy, dialogue, and community building. They understand that life isn't about me. Life is about us!

Servant leaders are people who do not run away from their calling when the way becomes hard and the challenges daunting. It was Abraham Maslow who coined the phrase "the Jonah Complex" to describe the person who is clearly called but refuses to answer the call. Jesus knew that James and John, far from being obedient to their calling, were circumventing it, asking to be placed at the head of the line. "O Lord, make it easy for us. Don't make us sign the covenant of service!"

Robert Greenleaf, who died in 1990, was considered to be the grandfather of "new paradigm" thinking. He is the one who coined the phrase "servant leadership." On his tombstone are the words, "Potentially a good plumber ruined by a sophisticated education." His point, even in death, was: If you're called to serve by plumbing, then plumb! Do your best to serve with your best.

We are in a time of transition. Culturally and congregationally, life is changing for us. Old paradigms are failing; new paradigms are yet to appear. We are being asked and invited to take roles of service that others have held. Some will give in to unrest; some will accept the mantle of service and reach for new ways to expand love in the world.

Jesus gave himself away long before he was crucified. Crucifixion he reserved for himself. But service is our way of identifying with the life that Jesus lived. James and John did not understand. The other disciples did not fully understand. Unrest resulted. Jesus says to us as he says to the bickering disciples: "It shall not be this way among you. You must be each other's servant." And here is the place where liberality of spirit meets evangelical zeal. The resurrection is a call to service! The resurrection, which we celebrate even on this cold and damp Sunday morning far from the promising blooms of April, has the power to turn old paradigms around.

What health and quality of life come into reality when we take Jesus at his word!

What creative power is released when service becomes the dominant motivation in human community!

Come, faithful ones, let us serve one another. James and John got it wrong. Let us get it right. Let us serve as God in Christ has served us.

Amen.