

Third Advent – Year B - December 17, 2008 - Homily
Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Psalm 126; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28
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In business circles, servant leadership has now become what Total Quality Management was in the eighties and early nineties. It seems to be a kind of vital revolution in caring for the most valuable resource any company has – its people. Imagine that – she says with tongue in cheek – relationships being important! Okay, many businesses only ‘got it’ after they started to figure out that the cost of employee turnover was extremely high and negatively impacting the bottom line was upsetting the shareholders and those generous executive bonuses! Yet even if for the wrong reasons, putting their people first was talked about a lot. Those of us not in the upper echelons of the corporate hierarchy knew that talk and action are two very different things. It took a lot longer to begin to implement some positive actions around all that talk, and to make a real difference in the kind of care of relationships that increase job satisfaction and employee retention rates. Such things as Employee & Family Assistance Plans, nursery care, flexible working hours, and leaves of absence started to appear as benefits. Putting others first is a core tenet of servant leadership. Interestingly enough, authentic servant leadership has been around a long time – thousands of years in fact. Well before the nifty name was coined and popularized by Robert Greenleaf and then picked up by, among others, Stephen Covey, as the new idea in business leadership. Jesus is of course, the perfect model of excellence when it comes to servant leadership. Moreover, I love that a way of being in the world modeled so elegantly by Jesus, is finding its way into corporate America, albeit under slightly different terms.

So what does Jesus teach us about servant leadership from Isaiah and from all the Advent readings? First and foremost, it is that Jesus was and is willing to meet each of us where we are. Jesus comes as a servant to release us from our prisons; however they are manifested in my life and yours. There is no doubt that Jesus also became a great leader. What Greenleaf reminds us is that servant-hood comes first, and Jesus’ acknowledged leadership skills are secondary. In his studies, Greenleaf defines ten characteristics of a servant leader. They are all gifts Jesus shared including, listening, empathy, awareness, healing, and persuasion; along with foresight, the ability to conceptualize, stewardship of resources, the commitment to growth in others, and community building. In Christian terms, the bottom line is that Jesus tells us, and shows us repeatedly what it means to be a servant of God. What we are called to is summed up in the Great Commandment: love God, and love our neighbors as ourselves. The specifics of what that looks like are found in our reading from Isaiah. The interesting thing is how the deeds of service are all active in helping others: bringing, proclaiming, releasing, comforting -- all culminating in restoration and real freedom in Christ.

Sadly, history is littered with examples that prove not every leader has understood or embraced the principles of servant leadership. There are many leaders in the world, past and present, who are not interested in primarily serving others, but desire power and often wealth above all. As, in the days of Isaiah leadership can be taken and enforced by violent means, or gained through fear and coercion. The difference in styles is unmistakable. Servant leadership emphasizes collaboration, trust, empathy and the ethical use of power with the objective of teamwork and personal involvement. Other leaders prefer to exercise power to suit their own objectives, and they build organizational structures that are hierarchical rather than collaborative.

Advent is a great time to think about our own community. How do we practice God’s graciousness? Have our community leaders embraced Jesus’ practice of helping others to grow in their faith and spirituality, and build community? Servant leadership takes work and

development. None of us can claim to be Jesus! As members of this community and members of Christ's Body – you, me, all of us are called to be leaders in building up the Body of Christ. Living in a community of faith also means that we are all empowered with the responsibility of holding one another accountable to living into our mission to *Practice God's Graciousness* through our faith in Christ, and by being good stewards of our resources.

In my reading this week, I found William Beausay's summary of the key leadership quality that he felt many Biblical and other world leaders had embraced. Some were truly servant leaders, and some were not. Their choices made all the difference in the world to the people they led, and the difference – for good or evil – that they made in the world. I think you'll be able to tell whether their leadership quality was one of a servant leader or not. Here is a selection: "Pharaoh said more worship from his subjects. Nebuchadnezzar said wealth. Aristotle said intelligence. Julius Caesar said power. ... King Solomon said wisdom. ... Thomas Jefferson said independence.... Abe Lincoln said unity... Winston Churchill said tenacity... Gandhi said self-discipline. Emperor Hirohito said world domination. Albert Einstein said peace." If you could ask for one leadership quality for yourself, what would it be? Is it more of something you feel you already have, or a quality that you feel you are lacking? What about for this community as a whole? Would you ask for more graciousness or for another value that might facilitate or complement our practice of God's graciousness?

Isaiah promises that "the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations." The Advent season invites us to ponder are own part in making God's promise true today, as we love and serve the Lord and our neighbors. Building relationships and caring for people is at the heart of all we do and who we are as followers of Jesus. Here is a final thought on all our God-given gifts from 19th century English divine, Frederick William Robertson, "It is not the possession of extraordinary gifts that makes extraordinary usefulness, but the dedication of what we have to the service of God."

Amen.