

Unexpected Qualities of Leadership      Matt. 11:28-30      10/4/20

The dictator of a small country was bitterly disappointed that no one was using the new postage stamps bearing his portrait. He called in his postmaster to find out what was going on. The postmaster explained that the stamps were not sticking to the envelopes. The dictator took a stamp, licked it, and stuck it on an envelope. It stuck perfectly. “What’s really going on?” the dictator demanded. The postmaster hemmed and hawed for a minute, and then explained.

“The truth is, sir, that the people have been spitting on the wrong side of the stamp!” Someone might be able to exert power over people by bullying and abusing them, but it’s another thing to gain their admiration, loyalty, and devotion. Jesus was able to attract and lead followers, who were willing to literally lay down their lives for him. How did he do that?

We are finishing a series of sermons on Jesus’ invitation found in Matt. 11:28-30. Jesus said, <sup>28</sup>*“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup>Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. <sup>30</sup>For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”* (Matt. 11:28-30) So far, we’ve noted that Jesus’ invitation is open to all people, that he invites us to bring a wide variety of burdens to him, and that he calls us to work with him to bring the values and practices of God’s kingdom to

earth. This morning, we'll finish the series with a look at what kind of leader Jesus is.

In verse 29, Jesus invites us to learn from him. That idea resonates with us Presbyterians, for we have always valued education! And we have had lots of classes and studies here at GPC to prove it- Sunday School classes, Disciple classes, small group Bible studies, women's circles, and youth groups. These opportunities to learn and grow in our faith are important.

Before coming to Gettysburg, Bonnie and I lived in a home in the woods and used a wood-burning stove to help heat the house. So I spent a lot of time cutting and splitting wood. I learned fairly early that when I was using the chainsaw to cut logs, I needed to stop fairly often to sharpen the blade with a file. If I didn't do that, it would take me two or three times as long to cut through the wood. Now, it was a nuisance to stop my work and do the sharpening, but it saved me time and effort in the long run. Being involved in Christian learning is a way of sharpening ourselves for the challenges that we face in day-to-day living. It takes time and energy, but it's worth it!

But the classroom model of learning wasn't the primary way people learned faith in Jesus' day. Instead, people would attach themselves to a rabbi or teacher that they trusted and serve a kind of apprenticeship with

him. And that's what people did with Jesus; they literally followed him from place to place, ate with him, heard him teach, watched him interact with others, and marveled as he healed the sick. They committed themselves to learn a new way of life from Jesus at great personal cost. That's how they responded to Jesus' invitation to "learn from me." But why would they choose to do that? And, why with Jesus in particular?

The answer is found in the next words of the passage. "*For I am gentle and humble of heart...*" People followed Jesus because they trusted him to be good to them! They believed what he taught because they saw how he lived- his miraculous powers, his integrity, his gentleness with those who were weak and with children, his strength in the face of injustice, and his humility. Those qualities enabled him to be a great leader and attracted others to follow him.

A 2018 article in the Wall St. Journal cited recent studies that found that leaders who are humble are linked to lower turnover and absenteeism, and that teams that worked with humble leaders performed better and did higher-level work than teams led by less-humble leaders. One consultant, who has worked with hundreds of CEOs, stated that his success rate in helping business leaders make changes to their personal and professional styles is about 40%. He said that the difference between those who

succeed and those who fail is humility. Those who are humble enough to receive feedback and take it seriously are the ones who ultimately succeed.

Being humble doesn't mean that you deny your gifts, abilities, and strengths. After all, those things are given to us by God! But a humble person knows that their strengths are a gift from God, which tends to keep their pride in check. That's why humble people can encourage others around them to succeed. Their ego doesn't need to be puffed up all the time. It's like a blocking back in the NFL- an often thankless position.

One such player was Tony Richardson, who played 16 seasons in the league. He was undrafted out of college, but signed as a free agent out of Auburn University. Although Richardson was an excellent runner himself, he was even better at blocking for others. In 2001 he was slated to be the featured running back for the Kansas City Chiefs, but instead he went to his talented young teammate, Priest Holmes, and told him that he wanted him to get the ball most of the time that year, and promised to do everything he could to help him. And he did, never becoming envious or resentful at his teammate's success. In a later interview, he was quoted as saying, "I can't explain it, but it just means more to me to help someone else achieve glory. There's something about it that feels right to me."

That kind of attitude is built on humility. A humble person isn't threatened by the success of others. And that is great for organizations of

all kinds. A quote attributed variously to Harry Truman, Ronald Reagan, and basketball coach John Woodin says, “It is amazing what you can accomplish if you don’t care who gets the credit.” It’s true! But you need a certain amount of humility to pull that off. The ancient Chinese philosopher, Lao Tse put it like this, “A leader is best when people barely know he exists. When his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say: we did it ourselves.”

Jesus was the kind of leader that empowered others to carry out the mission, the mission of bringing the values and practices of the kingdom of God to earth. He trained the twelve disciples, and many other close followers. He trained poor people and those with wealth, women and men, young people and elders. His humility and gentle spirit attracted all kinds of people to him, and still does today!

In C.S. Lewis’ book, Prince Caspian, we meet the young Narnian prince Caspian, whose father has been killed by his evil uncle, so he could take over the throne. Caspian, who is not aware of this, has also lost his mother, so his nanny raises him. She tells him stories each night of the brave and courageous men and women of ancient Narnia, stories that are forbidden under the rule of his cruel uncle. Over time these stories fill Caspian with a yearning for those old days of Narnia.

Much later, through the magic of that world, Caspian encounters some of those Old Narnians and tells them, "I want to stay with you- if you'll let me. I've been looking for people like you all my life." I believe that God has placed a longing in each of us to find someone who is truly good- who is powerful and capable, yet is filled with gentleness and humility. That person is Jesus! And he invites us to come to him and lay our burdens down so we can work alongside him, doing work that truly matters, making a difference in the lives of those around us and in our world. Will you accept his invitation?