

*Your steadfast love endures from age to age, O living God,
for in Christ you tenderly care for your people.*

*Instruct us in your way of humble service, that we may imitate his saving deeds of love. Speak to us now
through the power of the Holy Spirit. Give us grace to live for you. Amen.*

Matthew 23:1-12

23:1 Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples,

23:2 "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat;

23:3 therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach.

23:4 They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.

23:5 They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long.

23:6 They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues,

23:7 and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi.

23:8 But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students.

23:9 And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father--the one in heaven.

23:10 Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah.

23:11 The greatest among you will be your servant.

23:12 All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

Proclamation of the Word

This scripture is exactly why I never want a reserved parking space designated for "Pastor Parking." I did see a sign that read, "If you park here, you preach." I am thinking that might get interesting!

In 2003 psychologists shared the results of unpublished study in what has been dubbed "the cookie experiment."

The experiment was about power and about how power affects entitlement.

In the cookie experiment three same-gender participants were asked to discuss various political issues and make policy recommendations. One of the three participants was given the role of "judge" and asked to assign points rating the quality of the recommendations made by the other two participants. This placed the judge in a "high power" position relative to the other two.

About thirty minutes into the discussion the experimenter brought the three participants five cookies on a plate. And the number of cookies was carefully chosen.

Five cookies. Three people.

Someone isn't getting a second cookie. Who would that be?

What the researchers observed was that the person in the high-power position was significantly more likely to take a second cookie compared to the other two participants. In addition, the person in the high-power position was more likely to eat with their mouth open and to leave more crumbs on the table.

Power affects us. Power tempts us to take more cookies for ourselves. And power tempts us to leave messes for others to clean up.ⁱ

Jesus said, "The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted." (Matthew 23:11-12)

As I wrote this reflection, the news of the day was a comedian being accused of sexual misconduct and a fall from grace for an Alabama politician accused of molesting young girls. Such is the spiritually corrosive effect of power. We see a truly water shed moment in our world where women are speaking out about men in power who proverbially "took an extra cookie and left a mess for someone else to clean up." Power is tempting, even for scribes and Pharisees. Power is intoxicating and seductive. Power always has been. Jesus talked about it 2000 years ago. But leaders today are exposed in ways that leaders have never been, whether in the church or business or politics.

Jesus starts by pointing at "them" the religious leaders of his day. We must be careful not to use this to promote anti-Semitism as has been done, but to consider that all leaders in power are especially vulnerable to this temptation. Jesus is pointing the finger at the religious leaders of his day. He critiques from inside the family. Judaism is his faith. Jesus then touts servant leadership and humility.

It is written this way in *The Message*,

But be careful about following them. They talk a good line, but they don't live it. They don't take it into their hearts and live it out in their behavior. It's all spit-and-polish veneer.

⁴⁻⁷ *"Instead of giving you God's Law as food and drink by which you can banquet on God, they package it in bundles of rules, loading you down like pack animals. They seem to take pleasure in watching you*

stagger under these loads, and wouldn't think of lifting a finger to help. Their lives are perpetual fashion shows, embroidered prayer shawls one day and flowery prayers the next. They love to sit at the head table at church dinners, basking in the most prominent positions, preening in the radiance of public flattery, receiving honorary degrees, and getting called 'Doctor' and 'Reverend.'

It is so easy to point the finger. To see the hypocrites around us and to call out other people, is it not? A University community is a easy place to get caught up in status, titles, places of honor, and winning. I imagine it is easy to break into factions: faculty vs. administration, Students vs. professors, academics vs. athletics. Not to mention all the groups in our society: democrats vs. republicans, gun rights vs. gun reformers, mega-church vs. small church, my team vs. your team. Winning is a zero sum game. Humility gets tossed aside. Showing the other up and self congratulations is the norm. And it is easy to get caught up in self-promotion with social media tools at our finger tips. We can selectively choose what to publicize about ourselves. We all are all tempted to that kind of power. Life can become a show and tell- all spit and polish veneer.

It is so easy to point the finger at other people. So Jesus turns and points the finger at us. He says,

8-10 "Don't let people do that to you, put you on a pedestal like that. You all have a single Teacher, and you are all classmates. Don't set people up as experts over your life, letting them tell you what to do. Save that authority for God; let him tell you what to do. No one else should carry the title of 'Father'; you have only one Father, and he's in heaven. And don't let people maneuver you into taking charge of them. There is only one Life-Leader for you and them—Christ. (The Message, Matthew 23:8-10)

The finger is pointed at us, at you and me. The critical point Jesus makes is "They don't practice what they teach" but you are called to learn from me, trust me, follow me. With Jesus, as with his Father, the question is always of the heart, what is on the inside. And while we are pointing fingers with Jesus at THEM, Jesus compels us to look at our own hearts, to examine ourselves.

- Are we living lives of service?
- Are we leading a life that glorifies God?
- Is Christ our Life-Leader? or someone, something else?

Leadership books are always best sellers. But the Leadership Books Jesus peddles would be called *Downward Mobility for Dummies* or the *7 Habits of Highly Humble People* or instead of *Lean In*, Jesus would write, *Lean Back (and Listen)*.

Reflecting on this passage I remembered a book our son Avery read for a Leadership Seminar last year at Presbyterian College. The book is *The Servant; a Simple Story about the True Essence of Leadership*ⁱⁱ. Perhaps you have read it. The story is about John who is about to lose all he has, his job, his wife and family. His life is falling apart. He spends a week at a Benedictine Monastery with a teacher named

Simeon. In the course of the week, he finds new life. They begin their leadership class by learning the difference between power and authority. The leaders in our Scripture today have power and position, but lack authority. Jesus on the other hand has authority. His authority rests in his servant leadership, his love for others, and doing God's will.

Whatever roles we have signed up for: mother, father, boss, deacon, point guard, teacher, coach, board member, elder, worker, we have the ability to lead as a servant. Jesus is the greatest model of servant leadership.

Leadership as defined by the author, James Hunter, is "the skill of influencing people to work enthusiastically toward goals identified as being for the common good."ⁱⁱⁱ

In our Scripture today it is clear who the true leader is....not those who hold religious office. Jesus points to God, the Father, as having true authority. Jesus' authority rests not in his title or position, but in the way he loved, the way he served. Jesus was not consumed with trappings of success, but cared for the person in front of him. Jesus built loving relationships both the vertical kind with God, and with others. He practiced the greatest command to "Love the Lord your God with heart, mind, strength and love others as you love yourself."

Jesus said, "The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted."

You may disagree, but I think humility is in short supply. Humility is not being a slave, but a servant. Humility is not thinking less of yourself, but thinking about yourself less. Think of Moses. Moses was an authentic person without pretense or arrogance. The Moses' seat where the leaders like to sit, represents him. He was a servant after God's heart and loved God's people. But he also murdered an Egyptian for wronging a slave, doubted his abilities, and got frustrated with his work. He argued with God and yet, he served in love. Humility is about being authentically human, limitations and all. Being human means we need each other and God.

As one character in *The Servant* the nurse puts it,

We need each other. Arrogance and pride pretend we don't. The 'lie' of rugged individualism that is so prevalent in this country creates an illusion that we cannot and should not be dependent on other people. What a joke! Another set of hands pulled me from my mother's womb at birth; another set of hands changed my diapers, fed me, nourished me; another set of hands taught me to read and write. Now another set of hands grows my food, delivers my mail, collects my garbage, provides my electricity, protects my city, defends my nation; another set of hands will comfort and care for me when I become sick and old; in the end, another set of hands will lower me into the ground when I die.^{iv}

Humility. The urban dictionary top definition defines humility this way, *Humility- Teachable. Knowing that you do not have all the answers.*^v

Not a bad description. We are all students, disciples, under the tutelage of the Greatest Teacher, Jesus. Teachable disciples practice the disciplines of Love. For Love is what was missing from the leadership that Jesus pointed out and critiqued.

Love is a verb. And love is as love does. It is patience, kindness, humility, respectfulness, selflessness, forgiveness, honesty, and commitment. Our world needs more love. And we have the greatest of Teachers. The question becomes are we be teachable? Do we expect we have something to learn from others, valuing others who may differ or be different, and looking to God to whom belongs all authority?

We have choices. God gives us grace to choose.

We will take more cookies and leave more messes or

We will be servant leaders in our homes, our church, our community, our workplaces.

Which will you choose?

ⁱ Beck, Richard, *The Politics of Exalting the Humble—Matthew 23:1-12* k)27 Oct, 2014 www.politicaltheology.com

ⁱⁱ Hunter, James, *The Servant; A Simple Story about the True Essence of Leadership* (New York: Random House, 1998, 2012)

ⁱⁱⁱ IBID, 76.

^{iv} IBID, 111-112.

^vwww.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Humility