

**“The Servant”****Mark 10.35–45****The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 22 October 2006**

Unless you know about Jesus, this line of reasoning may seem counterintuitive, if not just plain wrong – that the one who wants to be top dog must be the servant of all.

It's important to understand what Jesus is implying here. Most of us who are parents can probably relate fairly well. Our parental servant role has at one time included: middle of the night feedings, changing diapers, trips to the emergency room, chauffeuring duties (that for some of you mean soccer games across the state), late nights waiting up for your kids to get home, and then there is higher education. That's servitude...and when you borrow money to put them through college, it becomes indentured servitude.

So, we have a pretty good model of what Jesus is talking about. A few years back, some ministers in Connecticut got together to suggest some “alternative” words to favorite hymns, and my suggestion was “Won't you let me be your doormat, come and walk all over me.” In all seriousness, Christian service is not about being a doormat or a martyr or a victim. It is about a healthy willingness to serve.

There are costs in service to others, but of course there are also great joys. I don't know about you, but when I think of servitude, it conjures images of being chained to a bench, rowing with the other galley slaves or perhaps being a scullery maid like Cinderella, forever consigned to life of washing endless dirty dishes. Well, Christian servitude can be different. Unlike looking into the back of another galley slave or gagging when you see one more stack of plates to wash, servants of Christ actually catch a glimpse of the kingdom of God every now and again. There are moments of joy that come as a result of being a servant.

I've been corresponding and working with a man named James for about a year and a half. James was in the Larimer County Detention Center awaiting trial when he saw the UCC's “God Is Still Speaking” television ad, and in he said that it made him feel as if the roof of the jail had just been lifted off. He heard the ad say, “No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you're welcome here,” and he wondered if it was for real. So, he took out the yellow pages and called the UCC church he found: Plymouth. I went over that afternoon and talked with James and told him he would be welcome here. Eventually, James was sentenced and served time out in Sterling, and we kept up a correspondence until he was released in August. Thanks to you, we were able to put him up for several nights, and John Nortier took him out for lunch. Today, James is a fulltime student at Aims Community College, getting good grades, has bought a car, and I helped him move some furniture into a new apartment last week, and Plymouth helped a bit with his rental deposit. I also have to tell you that we received a postal money order from James two weeks ago, because he wants to start contributing to the church. And last Sunday he worshipped with us here at Plymouth, and he was able to turn the tables and be on the serving side of the counter at the Mission. I can't tell you how great it feels to see James making positive changes in his life. Our servanthood has caught on, and now James is becoming a servant, too.



If you are on a board or committee here at Plymouth, you have probably either read or heard one of our congregational leaders talking about a book by James Hunter, called *The Servant*.<sup>1</sup> At our annual retreat early last spring Gail Gumming, one of our

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<sup>1</sup> James C. Hunter, *The Servant*. (NY: Crown Business, 1998)

members who works in organizational development, led the Church Council through this book, which essentially says that leadership is about servanthood. (And I hope Gail will be offering this through our small-group ministry program, and I'd encourage you to take advantage of it.)

The leadership model in Hunter's book draws a parallel between leadership and *agape*, the self-giving love described in the New Testament. He suggests that love and leadership hold these values in common: patience, kindness, humility, respectfulness, selflessness, forgiveness, honesty, and commitment.<sup>2</sup>

Now this is not an original idea. John Greenleaf, a well-known management guru at AT&T who developed the concept of servant leadership way back in the 20th century (!). Here is the basic concept from the book he published in 1970: "The servant-leader is servant first. . . . It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. He or she is sharply different from the person who is leader first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions. For such it will be a later choice to serve – after leadership is established. The leader-first and the servant-first are two extreme types. Between them there are shadings and blends that are part of the infinite variety of human nature.

The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served. The best test, and difficult to administer, is: do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or, at least, will they not be further deprived?"<sup>3</sup>

That is the kind of leadership we are trying to develop here at Plymouth, and this goes back to our strategic plan of 2003.

The reality is that the idea of servant leadership is far older than Hunter or Greenleaf; it's right there in the New Testament. It is the way of living that Jesus modeled.



If you've been around Plymouth for awhile, you've heard me say that the word *minister* is one of the Latin words for *servant*.

The role of the ordained minister involves a wonderfully diverse array of roles: spiritual leader, encourager, empowerer of **your** ministries, coach, champion, evangelist, worship leader, resident theologian, counselor, keeper of tradition and change agent as well.

I take this role and this privilege very seriously; it's a sacred covenant that binds us together. There are few professions that afford the privilege of sharing the last moments of a person's life, the union of a couple, the welcoming of new life into community, trust with intimate confidences, the leadership of spiritual lives of individuals and a community. But I am looking at a sanctuary full of ministers. . . or servants.



So, how are you a servant? Are you a parent? A caregiver for an elderly parent? You probably have many ways of servanthood in the context of your family, your work, and your community. And how are you a minister at Plymouth and beyond?

Now, that the Personnel Committee has provided you with a survey, and you all have had a chance to participate in evaluating my ministry at Plymouth, I'm going to turn

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<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Greenleaf, *The Servant as Leader* (Westfield, IN: Greenleaf Center, 1970) See [greenleaf.org](http://greenleaf.org) for more.

the tables and ask you this question: How would you evaluate **your ministry** at Plymouth? How have you served God this year through what you've done at Plymouth? Maybe you've provided a meal for someone who needed some help, or perhaps you've served as an usher or liturgist for worship. Hopefully, you've provided financial support for the congregation through your annual pledge and through the capital campaign. Maybe you've served as a trustee, helping to keep the building and grounds in shape or you may be one of those evangelism team members who delivers bread to anyone who leaves their name and address on those red friendship pads. Or maybe you are a Calling/Caring Minister who visits with an elderly member. Perhaps part of your ministry is going up to visitors with blue mugs at coffee hour to introduce yourself and make someone feel at home. It could be that you're not physically able to do any of those things, so you keep Plymouth and its members in your prayers.

So, if I were to ask you to fill out a performance evaluation of your ministry at Plymouth, how would you rate yourself?

You can actually take a couple of notes on your bulletin if you want, because I'm going to use a 1 to 5 scale in your self-appraisal. One is basically not so good and five is outstanding.

- First question: How have you done in overall participation in your ministry at Plymouth?
- Next: How have you done in terms of stewardship of your financial resources, both with the capital campaign and with your annual pledge?
- And how would you evaluate your stewardship of time? How much have you been able to devote to your ministry?
- How would you rate your participation in worship? (Please take off one point if you don't sing the hymns.)
- How have you helped implement our strategic plan? (Take off one point if you didn't know we have a strategic plan.)
- And finally, how would you rate your spiritual health? (For example, do you pray, find time for retreats, read theology or spirituality?)

So, how did you do? (If you need to build your score a bit, you would be welcome to write a letter in our fellowship hall on behalf of Bread for the World and to sponsor our Goodness Gorillas, who are participating in the Crop Walk today.)

I invite you to be in prayer about your ministry...where you are called to be and what you are called to do. And I pray that you will have the strength to go even further. And, as our second hymn and Sharon in her pastoral prayer said, it's important that we have the grace to be served as well as to serve. The ability to accept the servanthood of others is a part of ministry.

Some of you know this quotation from Dr. King, but you may not have heard it fully, so I'm going to close with it.

"Everybody can be great. Because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You don't have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don't have to know Einstein's theory of relativity to serve. You don't have to know the second theory of thermodynamics in physics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love."<sup>4</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> in Marian Wright Edelman, *Guide My Feet*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), p. 114.