

When I was growing up on my parents small farm I had a neighbor who was well loved throughout the community. He was friendly, talkative and fun. Many people in the area praised him highly for his generosity. If anyone was in need he was sure to lend a hand. If you needed to borrow a piece of farm equipment, he was sure to lend it. If you needed some extra labor, he would help. People said that if you were in need he would give you the shirt off his back.

Yes, most everyone loved this happy generous man - except those of us who knew him closely. While he wasn't outright abusive to his wife and children, he wasn't far from it. At home he was lazy. He was often bad tempered. He was uncooperative and manipulative. When he was at home he had every excuse in the book to not help out - he was tired, his shoulder hurt, he had knee problems, he had foot problems. All of these problems disappeared quickly, or were minimized, if it meant helping someone else. Quite often the generosity that people in the community saw him living was really coming at the expense of his own family.

He taught me an awful lot about the real nature of people. He taught me that what was on the surface wasn't always true. And he taught me that a very self-centered person can appear to be very generous in a crisis, or when generosity will win praise. When it comes to the long term burden of being generous and loving not everyone holds up.

Some of these thoughts go through my head when I consider the request James and John make of Jesus in our gospel reading. Let's remember that the way our gospel writer Mark tells us about this encounter is almost comic. If you put it in the broader context of Jesus' ministry we realize this is right after the third time Jesus has predicted his upcoming arrest and crucifixion. The first time Jesus predicts this Peter takes him aside and rebukes him for it. Jesus in turn rebukes Peter and says, "Get behind me Satan." The second time Jesus makes this prediction the disciples respond with a little private conversation about themselves over who will be the greatest among them. Then there's the third prediction, right before our gospel reading starts, and in respond James and John as for the seats of power. As readers we think these bone-headed disciples are never going to get it!

But their comic ignorance is recorded to teach us things too. When Jesus says to James and John, "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized by the baptism that I was baptized with?" they reply, "We are able." I have a feeling they have in mind some great heroic feat they will have to perform. They envision something spectacular happening, some great crisis, and they will rise to meet it in glorious fashion. If that were the case I imagine they could have met the challenge. Almost anyone can rise to great heights in a time of crisis; but what about the long slog of commitment?

I wonder what James and John would have felt if Jesus had replied, "Okay guys. Here's your task. For the next 25 years you will go to the local hospital every day and mop the floors, empty the bed pans, and take out the garbage. You'll do it for no pay and you'll do it at night when no one sees."

That's not the kind of thing they had in mind when they said they could drink the cup that Jesus would drink. But that's basically what Jesus meant when he said, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers

lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all."

One of the greatest examples of pure servanthood I've ever encountered was in the family my one aunt and uncle. They were unable to have children so they began to adopt. They first adopted a baby boy. And then they adopted a baby girl. Sometime later they adopted a second boy. All three of these kids were perfectly normal - or as normal as it's possible for any child to be. They had a solid marriage, a solid life, and three solid kids. And then along came a fourth baby in a crisis. My aunt and uncle recognized the strength of their family and felt they could offer the care and support this baby in a crisis needed. They knew he would have special needs. They knew there would be problems. They knew it would take work, but they were strong, solid, and committed to helping a baby in need. So they adopted him.

They got far more than they bargained for. He was a holy terror from day one. People used to criticize them for keeping

him on a leash, but it was the only way to control him without someone constantly keeping a hand on him. He demanded all their attention and all their time. As he aged there were increased costs because of his physical and mental health needs. The family's budget became focused on his needs.

The three adopted healthy children were daily making sacrifices for their youngest brother. Attention from mom and dad grew less and less. Family vacations, holidays, presents, and all sorts of things had to be scaled back. When all was said and done they sacrificed their childhood for their little brother's needs. As they grew up there wasn't money for their college costs, or cars, or help buying a house from mom and dad. It was an incredible act of selflessness on their part, yet no one sung their praises.

Now, it would all have a happy ending if I could conclude by saying that because of their sacrifices the baby grew up to be a productive part of society, or that he recognized what they had sacrificed for them and one day he became grateful. But that is not the case. He grew up just as wild as he was when he was an infant. After getting into legal trouble, trouble with

women including one pregnancy -at least that we know of- he was killed in a reckless motorcycle accident. So much for my other cousins' sacrifices. What was the point to it all? How willing are you to be a servant and a slave if no one is going to really benefit from it? That is real servanthood.

The world never recognizes such selflessness... but God knows. God sees. God understands. And in the midst of the many mysteries of life we entrust the whole messy situation into God's very capable and gracious loving hands.

The disciples didn't have a clue about understanding love such as this. All they saw was praise, glory, and success. Jesus said the last shall be first and the first shall be last. I expect that on the ultimate judgment day there will be many surprises. We will find that many a loving act was done that was known only by God - perhaps even the giver didn't recognize the act of servanthood. But when they were doing it they were embodying God's gracious love for someone else.

True giving, true servanthood is not something that can be leveraged. Not for earthly glory, nor for heavenly glory - else being a servant is just a work we do to earn our way to heaven. No, true giving is simply a reflection of God and it may have no earthly benefit that we ever recognize, but when you reflect God's love there is always an eternal good.

Let me end with these Ten Commandments of Leadership that I picked up along the way. I think we can aptly rename them the Ten Commandments of Servanthood because that fits too.

1. People are illogical, unreasonable, and self-centered. Befriend them anyway.
2. If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish ulterior motives. Do good anyway.
3. If you are successful, you will win false friends and true enemies. Succeed anyway.
4. The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow. Do good anyway.
5. Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable. Be honest anyway.

6. The biggest person with the biggest ideas can be shot down by the smallest person with the smallest mind. Think big anyway.

7. People favor underdogs but follow only top dogs. Fight for a few underdogs anyway.

8. What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight. Build anyway.

9. People who really need your help may attack you if you help them. Help them anyway.

10. Give the world the best you have and you'll get kicked in the teeth. Give the world the best you have anyway.