

Bill Cosby, formerly beloved television star of the 1980s, gets prison time for sexual assault. Leaders on both sides of the political context focus more on scoring points with their constituencies than making any efforts toward justice, or governance, or even bipartisanship. National leaders do nothing to stop the oppression and murder of minority groups in their countries. Those are ripped from headlines just from the past week. This is what we see from our leaders in this time in which we live.

Now, I am certainly not holding up those I've mentioned as model leaders at the best of times, but it strikes me that we've been hitting a lot more lows lately. And as I continue to reflect, I have to ask myself why I'm even disappointed. Why on earth should we think that professional athletes, celebrities, or even politicians are the models we should look to for leadership? They aren't inherently worse than the rest of us, but they aren't inherently better, either, and they are certainly able to behave badly on a grander and more visible scale than most people we know. They are tempted by the desire for prestige, for greatness, for control, for fame, for money. We think it should be better in our churches, but then: The priest at the center of Chilean sexual abuse scandal is finally defrocked by the Pope, after being protected by the Church. One of the faculty members from St. Paul's Episcopal School in New Hampshire was sentenced to jail last month related to abuse at the school, following allegations against at least four teachers by more than 20 students.

Many in the church, called as pastoral leaders, are intoxicated by power and cause unspeakable harm.
If not them, whom can we trust to lead us inside or outside the Church?

And power-seeking leadership isn't a new story by any means. Certainly it goes back to biblical times.
Our Gospel passage begins with a whiny little rant by John about someone else who is casting out demons without the proper credentials.
Can't you just hear him? "Jesus, Jesus! Make him stop! *We're* your disciples, *we're* the ones in charge of demon-casting."

Now, with the placement of this story in his Gospel, Mark is clearly making a point.
It's sandwiched between two other disciple power plays.
Remember that in last week's Gospel text the disciples spent their trip to Capernaum arguing about which of them was the greatest.
Jesus told them that whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.
And, as was so often the case, the disciples missed the message, because the next thing we hear is today's example:
John making the point that while the disciples may not be able to come together on which of them is the greatest, they can at least agree that they are greater than that other guy out there casting out the demons.

And in the next chapter of Mark, a reading we'll see in a few weeks,
James and John catch Jesus alone and ask for the seats to his right and left, in his glory.
They haven't quite given up on the idea that there is fame and status and power to be had

if they just play their cards right with Jesus.

But Jesus doesn't see any threat in the unnamed person's casting out demons.

“Whoever is not against us is for us.”

If someone is doing deeds of power in Jesus' name, that person is an ally, not a threat.

Church leaders – not just clergy, but all who serve in the church – are meant to be stewards of God's grace, not decision-makers of who gets it, or gets to give it.

Leadership, for Jesus, isn't about the title, or the glory, or being in the “in crowd” of the movement.

It's not about being one of the special people.

It's not about getting our way, as individuals or as a congregation, but connecting to the way of Jesus in the larger Body of Christ.

Leadership, as Jesus understands it, is available to all, because it's about righteousness, and servanthood, and sacrifice. Leadership is all about discipleship.

So what does servant leadership, sacrificial leadership, *discipled* leadership look like?

Well, right away we can say it means not acting in a way that turns people away from following Christ,

especially those who are struggling to figure out what that means.

“If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me,

it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.”

Certainly seeing a Christian community sunk into envy, competition, and battles for status and glory

might be a stumbling block for those who are already tired of seeing that in worldly matters.

It seems to be the opposite of being good stewards of grace.

So, too, a sense of exclusion, the idea that only those who have been around a long time, or have special roles, or special talents, can be leaders. That's a stumbling block, too, in a faith that invites in all who are willing to believe in Jesus Christ.

And isn't this a stumbling block we put in front of ourselves as well?

When we define leadership in a way that's different from servant leadership, don't we often end up excluding ourselves?

I'm not a leader; I can't get up and talk in front of a crowd.

I can't lead a committee; I wouldn't know what to do.

I'm just not the right person to serve on a vestry;

I haven't been here to know the history of this place.

I'm not old enough, young enough, experienced enough, energetic enough, smart enough, organized enough, creative enough.

What do I have to offer as a leader?

When we think like that, we're still defining leadership on worldly terms, not Jesus' terms.

Servant leadership turns the world's idea of leadership on its head.

Greatness is defined as serving others, not as recognition or power or status, and not as special talents or gifts.

The gifts that matter, in disciplined, servant leadership, as they are in every area of the Christian walk,

are those things we promise one another as a community at every baptism.

After the statements of faith, we make promises of how we will live.

And how we live is the mark of leadership – for each one of us.

[Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?

Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?

Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?

Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?]

James would add, “Will you pray for and anoint and forgive one another?”

Woody Allen once said, “Eighty percent of success is just showing up.”

I’d say that’s true for Christian leadership as well.

Being faithful is important.

The verbs in the baptismal promises are things like “continue,”

“persevere,” “strive,”

not “succeed,” or “be the best at,” or “be a superhero.”

“Will you persist?”

Tenacity is not a special gift held only by those in the inner circle.

As Christian writer Anne LaMott posted yesterday,

“Today’s radical act...I will not give up.”

Even when the world looks toward injustice and power grabs, we persist.

And in persisting, we lead.

Servant leadership is leadership by example, encouraging one another in this covenant community.

Far from causing one another to stumble, we walk together, and serve one another, and serve Christ in all persons.

We steward the grace God has given us by sharing it with one another and with our families, friends, neighbors, and enemies.

Of course, the great model for us in servant leadership by example is Jesus Christ,

who leads us all the way to the cross.

The Jesus, Paul writes to the Philippians,

“who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

Servant leadership is how we live this:

death to self, and resurrection into the new and joyous life of
service to God and to one another.

Death to always being right and imposing that on others,
to not living sacrificially as part of the little-c church and the big-c
Church.

Death to grasping for power or trying to be something other than
what God calls us to be,
instead of using what God has given us, whom God has created us,
to offer grace and healing to the world.

It is tempting, busy 21st-century Americans that we are,
to think that other leaders should do that,
whether it's the clergy or the vestry or the ministry leaders.

It's a way of trying to let ourselves off the hook.

But everyone here is called to be a servant leader, a steward of
grace, and an example of that for those around us.

The late Bennett Sims, former Bishop of Atlanta,
writes in his book *Servanthood: Leadership for the Third
Millennium*,

“Greatness of humanity is always among us.

If a group of people is asked to name those who have been servant leaders for them,
the lists grow quickly.

Their servant leaders will be parents, teachers, grandparents,
coaches, priests and pastors, sisters and brothers.

Servant leaders are those whose lives affect the lives of others for good:

doctors, chambermaids, executives, teachers, mechanics,
merchants, maybe even a politician now and then.”

And servant leaders, working through the Church, affect the lives of those in the neighborhoods around us.

Think for a minute.

Who are the servant leaders you know?

Who are the people who define success by giving
and who measure achievement by devotion to serving God, the church, and the world?

Who are those people in your homes and your workplaces?

Who are those people in this church?

They are the ones who do deeds of power in Jesus' name.

Which looks like praying for others, singing songs of praise,
anointing in the name of the Lord,

forgiving, healing, offering the cup of water which is love and peace and forgiveness.

Sometimes it even looks like putting aside what we've always done

to rest and to listen to God.

It always looks like putting ourselves last,

so that we can humbly offer God's grace to world that needs it desperately.

My brothers and sisters, as we enter the season of intentional reflection on what grace God has given to us
and how we are meant to steward it,

I challenge each of us to be a servant leader,
and to shower those around us with the same abundant grace God
has given us.

It doesn't matter who you are or how old or young you are or
whether you've ever been in charge of anything before.

What matters is that we walk forward in faith, and that you serve,
in the image of Christ,
no matter where the road leads.

Amen.