

TRUE GREATNESS

Every year at this time some of our high school seniors ask me to write letters of reference in support of their college applications. I am always delighted to oblige them. It's a real joy to recommend the great kids here at Saugatuck.

While I usually sign letters John H. Danner, for those reference letters I pull out all the stops and sign them the Rev. Dr. John H. Danner, PhD. I don't know if it really matters, but in the world of college admissions, just like the world in general, credentials often count for something. And the relative importance of an individual is often measured in quantifiable terms like how many degrees are strung after his or her name, where they went to school and who they know.

I read recently about a young woman who applied to a college that had the usual questions on their application forms about extracurricular activities, course work and so on. But it also had a question that asked: "Are you a leader?"

The young woman was an honest soul, and felt that the only truthful response was "No." And so that's what she put down on the form, assuming it would end any hope of being accepted.

Several weeks later she got a response from the college. To her surprise it was a fat envelope—what every college applicant hopes for. The cover letter read, "Dear Applicant, a study of the application forms reveals that this year our college will have 1,452 new leaders. We are accepting you because we feel it imperative that they have at least one follower." (S. I. McMillen, *None of These Diseases*)

It is very funny, yet it also contains a real measure of truth. For many, many folks have an overblown sense of their own importance. And even more people buy into the idea that being a leader is all about being better than somebody else. It is quite possible that's what prompted John and James to ask Jesus for a special favor in our passage from Mark.

Jesus and the disciples are almost to Jerusalem. They've traveled together for three years. James and John were among the first to answer Christ's call. Along with Peter, they are depicted in the gospels as his closest friends. They have seen him perform miracles. They have listened day in and day out to his teachings. They have heard his stories and wondered at his wise sayings. He has spoken frequently about the kingdom of God. And James and John, and most likely the others, have assumed he is going to establish a new political entity. They probably think he's on his way to Jerusalem to mount a revolt and to overthrow the Romans. They think he's going to take Caesar's place and become the new king. So when he does they want to make sure he remembers who helped get him there in the first place.

“When you become king, Jesus, let us sit in the seats of power. Let one of sit on your right hand, and the other on your left. We’ve earned it Jesus. We’ve got the necessary credentials!”

Speculating on the matter, scholar William Barclay writes: “Maybe their ambition was kindled because more than once Jesus had made them part of the inner circle . . . Maybe they were [financially] a little better off than the others. Their father was well enough off to employ hired servants . . . and it may be that they rather snobbishly thought that their social superiority entitled them to first place [in this new kingdom].” (*Daily Study Bible: Mark, 295*)

Yes, they had listened to many of his sermons, but did they really hear them? Had they heard him when he said, “The first shall be last, and the last first.” They had listened to his teaching, but clearly they didn’t get it. If they had, they would never have asked for places of privilege.

Yes, Jesus expects them to be leaders, but not in the way they are thinking. Not in the way the world usually thinks about leadership. “You know among the Gentiles,” says Jesus, those whom they recognize as rulers lord it over them . . . But it is not so among you . . . whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.” (Mark 10: 42-44) Or, as Eugene Peterson translates it: “You’ve observed how godless rulers throw their weight around . . . and how when people get a little power how quickly it goes to their heads. It’s not going to be that way with you. Whoever wants to become great must be a servant.” (*The Message, 1831*)

This is a whole new way of thinking! And they are quite astounded. The very idea blows them away. The leader as servant? Imagine. But it is core to the message Jesus has been offering them for three years.

Indeed, just a few days later, Jesus goes so far as to illustrate this very idea at the last supper. It was the custom in that dusty land where everyone wore sandals or went barefoot to have your feet washed before a meal. But such work was normally performed by the lowliest of household slaves. Not by the host! But at the last supper it is Jesus who takes up the wash basin and towel. He gets down on his knees, and scrubs off the dirt and grime that clings to his followers’ feet. He is their leader, but he is also their servant. He is a servant leader—and he calls them to the same. “[W]hoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant . . .” (10:44)

There are some wise folks in the world who seem to understand this principle. Management guru Peter Drucker, an active Roman Catholic, gets it. He writes in one of his books, “Leadership is not characterized by stars on your shoulder; an executive leads by example.” (*Managing the Non-Profit Organization, 193*)

And David Needleman, the CEO of the enormously successful discount airline Jet blue and a devout Mormon, frequently demonstrates his understanding of the concept. When he flies on one of his company's planes, he doesn't just sit back and snooze in one of the leather seats; rather he helps out the flight crew by passing around snacks and blankets. He talks with the pilots about their work. He even stays behind and helps the clean-up team sweep out the seats and throw out the trash. "You can't ask employees to do something," he says, you wouldn't be willing to do yourself." ("And Now the Hard Part," *Fast Company*, May, 2004)

When I was in the hospitality business I worked for Marriott—there too the principle of servant leadership was at work. Our education as managers began in the dish room. During the three months of training we learned how to do every job we would later expect our employees to do. And those who'd already made it—the mangers and supervisors who were our trainers—rolled up their sleeves as well. Many a night I'd go home smelling like a well-used dishrag.

So what does this mean for the church? What does this concept, this idea of servant leadership, imply for us?

I've given it some thought recently, in terms of my own role, as pastor, and in terms of our role as a congregation. What does it mean for me to be a servant leader? And what does it mean for Saugatuck to be a servant congregation?

We start by recognizing that ultimately it is all about being obedient to Christ. It is about putting Christ's teachings into actions. It is about placing God first in our lives. It is about loving our neighbors. As John Stott once wrote, "Greatness in the kingdom of God is measured in terms of obedience." (*Christianity Today*, Vol 40, No 3)

When I was ordained I took vows. I made promises. I swore before God and representatives of the church, that I would "serve faithfully" wherever I was called. *Serve* faithfully. While I have been given special privileges by virtue of my ordination, while I suppose that brings with it a measure of power, ultimately it comes down to service. I am here to serve God by serving you. That, incidentally, is why pastors wear stoles around our necks. While they do add a nice decorative touch to our robes, they are, in truth a symbol of servanthood, and originally were designed to represent a towel—the towel Jesus used to wipe his disciples feet. My job is to serve you, and in serving you, to help you serve others.

John Maxwell, a well-known Lutheran pastor, who is also a prolific author, has written: "A leader is not great because of his or her power, but because of his or her ability to empower others." (*Developing the Leader Within You*, 10)

There are many ways to measure a pastor's success, a pastor's effectiveness, but chief among them is his or her ability to enable others to serve.

Frankly, this is a real challenge at times. It calls for what church consultant Dan Hotchkiss describes as a “relocating of the clergy ego.” He writes: “We [pastors] need to shift our source of primary satisfaction from our own ministry to our contribution to the ministry of others. . . . We keep asking ‘Am I succeeding’ when we should be asking ‘How am I helping others to succeed?’” (“Relocating the Clergy Ego”, Alban Weekly, 9/18/2006, www.alban.org)

Pastors to be effective, must follow the example set by Jesus himself. We must be obedient to the master. We must throw a towel around our necks and get down on our knees and serve.

But it’s not just about pastors.

In many ways, being a deacon is the most prestigious position a lay person can hold in our church. People look up to our deacons, see them as spiritual leaders. And that they are, both by precept and by their actions.

But it is a leadership rooted not in power, but in service. Indeed the word “deacon” comes from the Greek word *diakonia*, meaning to serve. And the key task of a deacon, the one that symbolizes the role of a deacon, is literally waiting on table, serving the bread and cup of Holy Communion.

Two years ago Allison Bollert asked me to write some of those letters of reference. I was most pleased to do so, for she was not only a fine student, and a superb athlete, she was also a very involved member of our congregation. She was a teacher’s assistant in the church school, a leader in the youth group, and most recently, a deacon.

I was delighted to learn her college application essay was about her work as a deacon. In reading her essay, I was pleased to see that she got it. She understood the servant nature of the role. She wrote, in part: “I vividly recall teasing the student deacons at church about their ‘jobs’ while not even really knowing what they did. But a short simple phone call late in the after noon, right after our youth group’s return from [our] summer mission trip, changed everything. After some polite greetings, my pastor informed me that I had been chosen to become a deacon for the upcoming year. I was speechless . . . I am still developing my faith, so would it be hypocritical of me to take on this visible role?”

Later though, Alison came to see the servant nature of being a deacon. She concluded her essay by writing: “Love, respect, kindness and tolerance are important and prominent ‘rules for my life. My involvement in my church helped to solidify these choices. I greatly appreciate the chances I have as church to help others, build relationships and develop important values that guide my life. . . .My new role [as a deacon] is the first opportunity for me to give some of my own gifts to the church community which has offered so much.” (Allison Bollert, Fall, 2004)

Allison gets it. She understands the role of deacons.

But it doesn't stop there. Its not just pastors and deacons who need to get down on their knees. For Jesus is your lord as well. And you too are called to serve. St. Bede's Episcopal Church is a tiny little congregation. There is only one door in and out of their sanctuary, and over that door is a sign that reads "Servants Entrance". That says it so well. As Christians you are called to be servants.

Servants to one another and servants to the world. That, after all, is what this and every Mission Sunday is about. It's all about how Saugatuck Congregational Church can serve the world; how we can help address the needs and concerns of the hungry, the homeless, the sick, the imprisoned and the poor.

Sisters and brothers, you and I are all called like Alison, to use our gifts in service to others. We are called to be servants. Whether we are formally called to positions of leadership, or see ourselves as followers, we are all called to serve. Not just pastors, not just deacons, but all of us. We are called to serve God, each other, and our world. We are called to get down on our knees and wash the feet of a hurting world.

**Amen.
John H. Danner**