

## “Leadership Upside Down”

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Mark 10:35-45 = servanthood leadership

**G**ladys Nwabah is a faithful, devoted Christian woman from Nigeria who joined my congregation in Dallas. An educator of considerable intelligence and drive, she began to attend the Education Committee. However, cultural differences began to emerge over the give and take of our committee work. The way our committees and Session process information and come to a decision was a mystery to her, even a frustration.



One meeting in a particularly frustrating and involved discussion, she made the exasperated comment: “I don’t know why we are having all this talk. In Nigeria, the pastor just tells us what to do and we do it.”

This same intercultural difference has been observed in our own congregation. There are definitely different expectations of what leadership entails from place to place and group to group. One is not necessarily right and another wrong. Each is appropriate in its own context.

**N**evertheless, some forms of leadership are dangerous, even toxic. I remember the very proper British Lady Hestor Ransom, played by Maggie Smith in the film *Tea With Mussolini*. Along with all the other very proper English ladies in Florence, Italy before WWII, Lady Ransom thought that Mussolini was a “great man.” Why? Because “he made the trains run on time.”



Lady Ransom and all her friends could not believe it when they and all the Jews were rounded up and imprisoned. “Surely Mussolini knows nothing about this!”



People like a leader who takes control, who takes charge. But with such strong leaders, there is often a dark, even demonic side. Despots often impress the gullible. Many persons are unfortunately drawn to power like moths to a flame.

The English ladies were dead wrong about Mussolini. We in turn are wrong if we think God's plan for leadership is strength measured by the world's authoritarian understanding of strength.

**“whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.”<sup>1</sup>**

There it is again: in God's kingdom **“the first shall be last, and the last first.”** Jesus must really think we must be dense, since he says it over and over again.



**R**emember what else Jesus 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”<sup>2</sup>**

Sounds like Jesus was describing so many of our so-called “public servants” today. They use the language of serving, but the reality is far from that. Sounds like Jesus was also describing what so many expect of their pastors.



We do bring these expectations to church with us. Ron Salfen, pastor of Westminster Presbyterian in Dallas, on returning to Dallas after a number of years out of state, I asked him “what differences today from before?” His reply struck me: “When I left, this Presbytery was a land of giants. On return, it is much more equalitarian.” Before there had been strong, authoritative pastoral leaders like John Anderson and Bob Bohl, who became Moderators of General Assemblies.

Some have complained at the passing of that generation of leaders. I have even heard folks lament that in their minds God has left our denomination leaderless. But God never leaves us without leadership ~ just sometimes God lifts up leaders unexpected.

I've read it over and over again said explicitly in congregational searches for a minister: “We want a exceptional leader with strong management skills.” What they do often get with that description is a dictatorial micromanager. Thankfully the dossier our PNC is circulating takes a different approach.

However, members do tend to love this authoritarian model of pastor. These pastors let us off the hook ~ they're into everything. We don't have to do ministry ~ the minister does it all. The pastor is solely responsible for setting the vision and for the implementation of the mission. After all isn't that what we hired her or him to do.

Strong Leaders  
create  
Weak Followers



Our job in turn is just to whine, blame and complain. It's the pastor's job to entertain us, motivate us. We are not responsible, and the failures are all somebody else's fault.

Like those pre-war English ladies in Italy, congregation members are happy if the service ends on time, but is a Mussolini the best way to accomplish it? I suspect this is precisely why Jesus rejects this model.



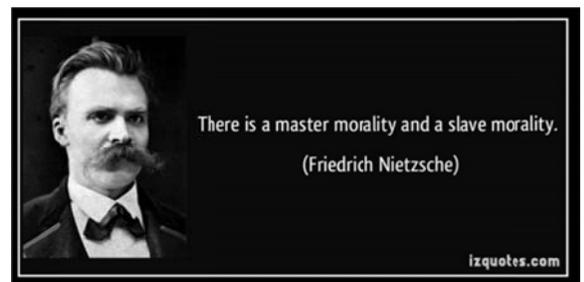
**M**ost of us are impressed with a charismatic leader who exudes authority. Charles Lindbergh campaigned across the US for of all people, Adolf Hitler. He idolized Hitler because in Lindbergh's mind Hitler "was bringing order to chaos" ~ echoes of genteel English ladies in prewar Italy.



The German philosopher Frederick Nietzsche was also enamored with authoritarian leadership. He venerated the "Übermensch" the super man as the true leader who gains and wields power specifically to oppress weaker humans. It's not just Nietzsche. Many other political philosophers including many Americans have adopted this view of authoritarian,

despotic rule as the best.

Nietzsche had nothing but contempt for Christianity. He called Christianity a "slave religion" noting that it spread among people at the bottom of society ~ the poor, women, slaves, the most vulnerable and broken. He charged that Christianity glorified the economic plight of those



at the bottom. It taught them, said Nietzsche, that there was something good and noble about servitude, allowing oneself to be exploited, serving the community.

Nietzsche meant all this as the harshest criticism. Today's gospel suggests that Christians ought instead to take this as high praise.<sup>3</sup>

In *It's a Wonderful Life*, George Bailey and Mr. Potter are another pair of opposites. George's whole life consists of putting his own aspirations aside in order to serve the needs of others. Both head banks. Yet George uses his position to finance low-income housing and other projects for the common good while Mr. Potter uses his bank to gain power over others. Potter even tries to ruin George's bank so that he can take it over.



Again two ways of living: one is a grab for power, another is a means of serving others. Both produce fruit: Potter dies alone while George lives a full and happy life surrounded by family and loving friends.<sup>4</sup>

Jesus is right. Leadership based on power and power-seeking is not God's plan. This is not leadership modelled on our Lord, the suffering servant who died for everyone to live.



Nietzsche however is right about one thing: we are a religion of the poor, women and slaves; of the oppressed and the vulnerable; of the Dalits, the untouchables in India; the sick, the addicted and vulnerable, and much, much more. All the misfits and losers in the eyes of the world are welcome here. We are a group of outsiders, resident aliens, ministering to, serving joyfully all the outsiders in the world.

People, leaders and congregation fall into two types: inward and outward. The first spend their lives and resources building a better life, taking care of their own, those like themselves.

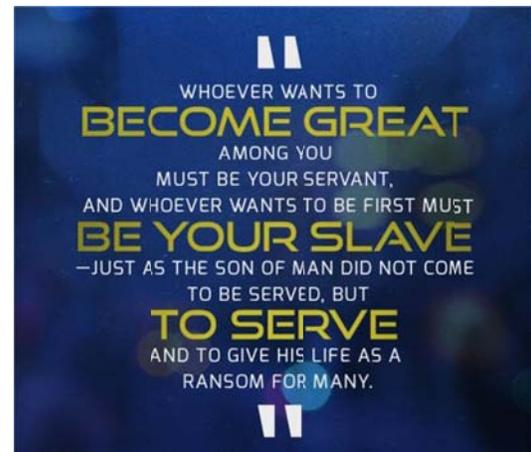
The second outward focused spend their lives and resources building a better life, taking care of those "not-their-own." not like themselves. Jesus makes it crystal clear what kind of people, leaders and congregations he expects. Jesus is absolutely clear which he wishes us to be. After he said:

“whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.”

Then Jesus concluded:

“For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”<sup>5</sup>

Imitation of Jesus, following Jesus leads inevitably to servanthood.



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<sup>1</sup> Mark 10:43-44

<sup>2</sup> Mark 10:42

<sup>3</sup> Will Willimon, *Pulpit Resource* 31:4, p. 16 for 19 October 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Edward McNulty, *Lectionary Homiletics* for October 18, 2015 p. 3

<sup>5</sup> Mark 10:43-45