

Lection: Matthew 23:1-12

What does it take to be a leader? What do you need to lead? What does it take to equip a person to do the tough work of leading a family, a home, a business or a community organization or a church? Some of us do it, some of us have done it, but all of us are impacted by the effectiveness or lack there of, of people involved in leadership. This morning, in our Gospel lesson, we are offered the words of Jesus on the subject of leadership.

Let me begin with two observations. If you have browsed a bookstore lately, or spent time wandering around in an airport gift shop, you know that leadership is a hot topic. I typed the word: “Leadership” into the Amazon search engine, and learned that there are currently 70, 596 books for sale on the subject of leadership. Reading a book a week, which is something I know a few of you try to do, it would take you over 1, 300 years to plow through all of the wisdom these writers claim to have. Some of the titles from the top of the list included “21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership”, “Strength Based Leadership”, “Leadership and Self-Deception”, “The Truth About Leadership: The No-Fads Heart of the Matter” and one with the most intriguing title: “Primal Leadership”—which I suppose might urge us to embrace the primal scream, or commit ourselves to the study of the behavior of the great silver backed apes to discover the true secret of

successful leadership. Lot's of people, it seems, have a great deal to say about leadership.

And, have you noticed as well, that there seems to be a near obsession with blaming the leader when things don't happen to suit the followers in any given situation? Have you noticed that there are entire television networks devoted to blaming leaders and talk show hosts who seem to have nothing better to do than look for dirt on leaders? A hurricane hits and suddenly it's the President's fault, or the Governor's mistake or the Mayor's missteps, or some failure on the part of the condo-board or the maintenance crew? When a company's in trouble they fire the CEO. When there is unhappiness in a club or an organization, the manager takes it on the chin and I won't even comment on what happens in churches when things don't go to suit a few of the members. Maybe those reactions are justified, or maybe they're not, perhaps in some cases, it is the leader's fault, but more and more, the consistent cry seems to be: "Off with their heads"—or rather "off with the head", when the body, the group, the state or the nation has a problem. Those are two observations on leadership.

Let's take a look at Jesus the leader and a listen to what he had to say about leadership. Jesus was clearly a leader. He led and others followed. But, he led without a title and from no recognized position of authority and he seemed to reject any of the normal trappings of a

leader. He didn't have a fancy costume, like this one. He had no exalted rank or entitlements. He didn't have an expense account or his own parking place and he never sat in the corner office and no one ever held a testimonial in his honor. He was born in a barn, died like a death row inmate, was buried in a borrowed grave despised by most and mourned by very few. And yet, he acted and spoke with an authority and a power which still changes lives.

And the truth, as I see it, is that his power and his style of leadership can change your life and mine and truly transform not only our hearts and our attitudes, but our very way of living. His way of leadership could transform the world.

What was his secret? Well, to begin with, it was not a secret and you don't need to read a book or take a short course in motivational theory to discover his way of leading. He was able to lead because he followed. He was able to walk the way of love, because he knew the one whose presence in life was the source of infinite power. Dozens of times in those four short books which record his life, we find Jesus seeking out a lonely place and praying. We see him making that connection that was the source of his power. We see him inviting others to tap into the same source and leave their worries and cares behind and join him on the way that leads to life.

As some of you know, my beloved was a computer specialist and I am in absolute awe of the work she did for Memorial Sloan Kettering

Cancer Research Hospital and the work she has been doing for our mission committee to help them organize their records.

Now, like a lot of you, I can type and I use the computer all the time, but I am only able to do so because of her patient guidance. Well, a number of years ago when she was still working outside of the home, she made one of her periodic trips to New York City. Normally she did her work from our home here in Naples by computer and on the phone—but she was up in New York in a borrowed office and one morning the computer in the office she was borrowing would not work. She tried everything. She played with it six ways from Sunday and finally she gave up and called the technical support hot line that they have there at the Hospital. “The techie” led her through several steps to try to discover what was wrong with her computer. He had her recheck all the things she had already checked twice and it still wouldn’t work. He was just about to give up and send a repair person to her office when he asked her to look behind the desk. Have you guessed what the problem was? The computer—the part that does all the work---was not plugged in. The central processing unit was suffering a disconnect from the one source that made it possible to do what it was created to do.

There you have it. The great disconnect. You and I are created to love and to lead and to reflect the glory of the one who created us. And that basic insight is so simple that most of us miss it about 90% of

the time. We miss it in our worry. We miss it when we get so tied up in our own lives and our own problems that we forget just who it is who loves us without condition and accepts our every flaw and failure with a constant and continuing compassion. We fly solo into the storm forgetting that the source of our peace has already promised to be our co-pilot. Jesus led because he followed and he invites us to do the same.

And what else did Jesus have to say about leadership? If you want to lead, find a way to serve. If you want to find yourself, find a way to give yourself away. And I do not pretend to suggest that that is either easy or obvious. It flies in the face of most of conventional wisdom and turns the world's understanding of leadership on its head. And yet, I believe that it is the path to true leadership.

A number of years ago on vacation, Charnley and I listened to a remarkable book by David McCullough, entitled "1776". It is a book about the darkest year of the American Revolution. The book records the dire days of that one year when a group of farmers and trades people and teachers and preachers and plantation owners and a sprinkling of slaves and freed black people—most of them pretty average folks, picked up the struggle for freedom and faced off against the most powerful nation on earth and their professional army. It is the record of defeat after defeat in the most miserable conditions. McCullough tells this story.

During the siege of Boston, one of the best of the American generals, a man named Israel Putnam was surveying the defensive works and as he rode through a trench, a large rock blocked his way. He ordered a soldier standing near by to move the rock and the soldier, not recognizing the general, replied that he was a corporeal in the army and that he did not move rocks. At this point, General Putnam, an old man, asked pardon of the soldier for confusing his rank, got down off his horse and picked up the rock and placed it on top the battlement. McCullough might have said that what that soldier did was an example of what a rag-tag and disorganized mess the Continental army was, but instead, he cited that event to suggest that that was the one thing which made that Army great. These were citizen soldiers and their leaders led—not because of title or rank, or fancy uniform, but in their willingness to serve and to give and to sacrifice.

And that's how Jesus led. He led as a servant leader. He led by example. He led by accepting everyone he met. He led by opening himself to the pain of others and he led finally by spreading his hands out and embracing the whole world and giving his life. And that is the sort of leadership to which we are called. In the strength God gives us, every one of us has a part to play. Our individual roles may vary, our talents may suit one task better than another, but like Jesus, we are

called to servant leadership. God give us the strength to follow and by following the way of love, to lead.

Amen.