

being the servant: modifying everything

The word I want to explore with you today comes out of the scripture reading from Matthew, when Jesus uses the word *servant*. That seemingly innocent word is placed at the end of this sentence: *The greatest among you will be your servant.*

Now most of us, I suspect, have a predisposition to what it is to be a “servant” and most recently it probably comes from *Downton Abbey* or from *Upstairs Downstairs*, or on a lighter note, sticking with TV as a resource, the old British series: *Yes, Minister* or *Are You Being Served?* **None of the above will help you with Jesus use of this word servant! Just in case we thought we already were an experts on the significant use of this term for it is used so many times in the “New Testament”...**

The scripture we have today is translated from the Greek and the word used is *diakoneos*\*(*diakoneos..but my computer spelling corrected it to diamonds*) which is to be an agent, attendance, a minister..a servant and the verb which comes up often in the New Testament related to this word is “to serve,” which is *diakoneo* which is to administer, aid, deliver, helper, provide, service, serve as a deacon.

Consider for a moment, if you or anyone you know has every been considered an ADMINISTRATOR—no matter how high up in the organization, even positions in the government are called MINISTER— of finance,— the environment and we have ...a PRIME MINISTER. So clearly minister is not limited to ecclesiastical titles! In Jesus use of this word (and it is recorded so often there is little doubt it was said by him) it is one who is to essentially enabling others, help others, take care of others, give what knowledge, information, encouragement you can because you are attending to and are aware of the needs of others. What ever **role/title we** have been given or earned it is how we enact that role as a servant, in order to be what Jesus calls great or the greatest among us in that role,

But, be careful, because in the closing sentence of this reading we are told that he used another word, that could cut to the quick some of our or high up so called “ministers or administrators” in any field,: *And all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted!* That is another topic but related for being humble comes from humus...which is the root word for earth..human...

Back to servant for now! This word is used frequently in the writings of the gospels and reported to be said Jesus and later in many letters of Paul as well as in the Acts of the Apostle and in letters by Peter. We have to ask, how come the church within a hundred years of Jesus crucifixion, we forgot or ignored that word! No one can say that Constantine understood the role of *servant* or *being a servant*. Unfortunately our own his/herstory took a turn and became part of the establishment of Rome, which had different values and standards than the early Jesus movement. We might say the *Jesus movement* was co opted.

But that is the past and how do you and I go about re-claiming what our founder said about being and acting as servant. There is a quote I want to share that was given to every Bishop as he/she was ordained in the Episcopal Church in the U.S., while I was on the Board of Directors of the ISL (Institute of Servant Leaders), led by a retired SERVANT Bishop, Bennet Sims. I got permission to give a framed copy to Bishop Michael Ingham many years ago while I was still with ISL and on Bishop Michael's staff. This statement comes from Bishop (or St.) Augustine of Hippo wrote to his congregations in around third century:

*For you I am a bishop, but with you I am a Christian. The first is an office accepted; the second is a gift received. One is danger, the other is safety. If I am happier to be redeemed with you than to be placed over you, then I shall, as the Lord commanded, be more fully your servant.* Augustine of Hippo, November 13, 354-August 28, 430, Bishop of Church in Northern Africa.

The good news is that some Bishop shortly after Constantine's involvement still understood his ministry as a servant and got Jesus' message and that centuries later another Bishop reminded us of that declaration!

So, in reclaiming the word servant, as Jesus uses it in such famous passes as "the Son of man came not to be served but to serve..."

"the leader is one who serves"

"But I am among you as one who serves"

"Where I am, there shall my servant be also"

What does that do to the roles we have today: Mother, Father, Doctor, Lawyer, Director, Secretary, Farmer, Grandparent, son, aunt, President of Garden Club, Lions Club, a nation...

Perhaps it means putting the word "servant" before the role(s) we have as a modifier : to qualify the role, a change that would give our position/role a new "orientation"...these are all dictionary suggestions for a "modifier. So think about it, what would it mean to put this word servant before the name of what we label

or are labeled: a servant doctor, a servant parent, a servant mother, farmer, president and so forth.

What would that do to your behaviour and mine if we did that consciously with the role(s) we have? Besides doing it because Jesus suggested it over and over again! Well, I can tell you it changed my role significantly as a Human Resource Manager of a large organization.

I took a leave of absence from my position as an Assistant Professor in a large university to work for a corporation as an organizational consultant for a year, applying what I taught in communication in the *real* world. After one month, I resigned my teaching position and stayed on full time at this relatively new computer company. I was both learning a lot, having fun and able to pay my bills! Before I knew it, or even realized it, I was managing a world wide personnel function with a large staff and many reports in the field (internationally). I was told that no longer could I work as a consultant/facilitator but I was now responsible to manage and give direction.

That did not work well for me. I was awake too often at 3 am with a stomach ache that said, something was out of kilter! Then out of the blue, the former Dean of my previous University, I and who was now a good friend, called me from her new position President of Agnes Scott, in Decatur, GA., and said the local papers announced the formation of the *Institute for Servant Leadership* and they were offering their first three day conference in a month. She said, "this sounds right for you." Well I read the announcement and signed up, went and returned—renewed and revamped how I did my position! Among others things, I started sharing what I knew because of my position and asked little of them for reports...and I ended up with all I needed to know to be more effective and to gain their trust and help too!

So many light bulbs went on during those three days, it was a miracle I did not have a head ache or start wearing sunglasses. Over and over again, stories were told and experience shared that revealed how much was gained when no matter what position a person had, if they saw themselves as paying true attention to others and seeking to support their efforts in ways they were equipped to do....they, others and the organization were healthier! (one of the attendees was the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church of the United States along with a few educational and business leaders).

One story that Bennett Sims told at that first workshop was a different interpretation of the Wizard of Oz. I have told this before but it is worth re telling: At the end of the story, Dorothy, Toto, the Cowardly Lion, The Scare Crow and the Tin Man make it to the Wizard's castle only to be confronted with a booming,

intimidating voice coming out behind a curtain. They all quake in fear and then Toto, pulls apart the curtain and reveal a man yelling into a machine that makes his voice aloud and fearsome. HE turns around and Dorothy, angry tells him that he is a Bad Man. No, he says I am a Bad Wizard: Then he redeems himself and awards each of the merry band specifically noting their gifts—  
The Cowardly Lion with a medal for his bravery  
The Scare Crow with a diploma for his clever thinking and strategies  
The Tin Man with a heart for all his care for others  
and Dorothy he tells her she can go home any time for all she has to do is click her heels with her special shoes she has had on all along and be home to Kansas

He became a Servant Wizard, recognizing the talents and abilities of others and by his attention empowering them to become what they had always been or had! He served them! He stopped focusing on his own “wizardry” and saw this merry band for what they truly were—more than worthy for supporting them on their journey

As Bishop Bennet wrote in his book, *Servanthood: leadership for the Third Millennium*, since we have free choice we will continue to make mistakes but there is also learning and forgiveness when we do and no limit to God’s love for us.

As St. Augustine of Hippo wrote:

*Pray as though everything depended on God. Work as though everything depended on you!* and let me add—let us do this, as people who serve others, following in the footsteps of Jesus. ...doing unto others and you would have them do unto you.