

Luke 22:24-27
“One Who Serves”
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Roslindale Congregational Church, UCC, Roslindale, MA
Third Sunday in Lent, March 20, 2022

The Reading:

Luke 22:24-27

²⁴ A dispute also arose among the disciples as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. ²⁵ But Jesus said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. ²⁶ But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. ²⁷ For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.

In my head I hear the disciples singing along with Liza Minnelli and Frank Sinatra. They want to be “king of the hill; top of the heap!”¹

Jesus’ first disciples **aren’t the only ones** who get caught up in competitions and disputes about which among them is the greatest.

I researched a congregation for my dissertation² in which the lay leaders had become preoccupied with status. At Cityside church this showed up in the trappings of class, education, profession, and tenure in the church. As just a small example, the church expected members to address each other by “Miss,” “Mr.,” “Mrs.,” which of course can be a practice of respect. This congregation also expected to be addressed by their degree and professional titles. More concerning, though, it also quietly closed leadership roles to those without a degree. This ecclesial classism created an unhealthy environment.

Pastor Curtis did not excuse this behavior, but he did me a favor by opening my eyes to an additional reason this pattern could have come about: this congregation was under stress. They were sitting in a dramatically changed neighborhood, one now ravaged by drugs, crime, gang activity, and poorly supported schools. Eighty percent of the residents around the church lived below the poverty level, while the members commuted in from the suburbs. Truth be told, the congregants were afraid of and had disdain for their neighbors. They had also been without a pastor for a year and a half and no interim. Their membership was dwindling and uncertainty reigned. It was a time of stress, and in a knee-jerk reaction, the members reverted to old ways of asserting control, as counter-productive as they were.

Bible commentator, R. Alan Culpepper, did me a similar favor as I tried to understand why the disciples were wrangling over status. He pointed out **the**

¹“New York, New York,” recorded by Minelli in 1977.

²*The Dance of a Changing Church: A Practical Theology of Congregational Transformation*, Boston University School of Theology, 2015).

surrounding context for their dispute in Luke; they were under stress.³ Their Reign of God movement was encountering more resistance and threats from the outside, and now, around the table of the Last Supper, Jesus has predicted that one on the *inside* would betray him. His followers were really anxious and on edge. Without thinking about it, they reverted to the same hierarchies of power and control that they abhorred, those that their Roman oppressors used toward them. “We’re greater than you. We’re your benefactors.” Competition to be top of the heap, all the way down, was the result.

Jesus nipped their arguing in the bud. He told the disciples (and us) in no uncertain terms, straight out: **“It shall *not* be this way among *you*!** Trying to be ‘top dog’ is *not* consistent with the Reign of God – the way that God leads.”

Apparently Jesus loves us as we are, and he loves us enough not to leave us that way!

Jesus was the greatest one that the disciples knew; he was the best leader they had ever followed, and this **Jesus gave them an alternative: they could be ones that serve – to be one who serves.** This was the kind of leadership he modeled for them. Jesus served God’s lead. He followed the example of the real ‘Greatest.’

Being one who serves is to take a bended knee in a time of stress. It is not to be the Greatest, but to serve the Greatest, not to consider yourself greater than another, but to serve the Greater Good.

Jewish tradition has the practice of wearing yarmulkes, especially during prayer. This skullcap signifies reverence and humility. It is a constant acknowledgment and reminder to them that God is above – greater than them – worthy of service.

We may not wear head coverings, but you and I can always ask, especially in times of stress and strife: **“How can I be *one who serves*? How can our congregation be one that serves?”**

If you are on a church committee, for instance: “How can I serve not my own will alone, but the discernment of God’s will together?” In government, a key question should be, “How can we serve the Common Good?” In our jobs, “How can I become a *servant* leader?” In our families, “Am I serving those I love and God?”

In Cityside’s case, Pastor Curtis perceived that those members who were preoccupied with status and being on top were actually in survival mode and “miserable.” Like Jesus, he firmly said, “This isn’t how it is to be with you,” and then gave them alternative practices. He called them “sister” and “brother,” for example, instead of using degree titles. He encouraged them to be leaders based on their spiritual gifts, and he emphasized the words etched on their church building that had become hidden behind the shrubbery: “A Church for All People.”

Little by little, the stress shackles fell off, and as “each one was given a voice, a new culture of peace and safety developed in that congregation, until they could genuinely be that Church of the One who serves.

³R. Alan Culpepper, “Luke,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume IX* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 427.