

Ronald Arms: Backwardness Training

Seekers Church

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When I called to ask Marjory about the lectionary readings for today, she checked them and read them to me over the phone. Realizing what I had been reading and writing about, she said, "The lectionary winked at you!" And indeed it has. I have spent the better part of the last several months reading and working with the subject of servant leadership. What could be a better lead in to the theme than Jesus reminding those who had been arguing about which of them was the greatest that, "If anyone wants to be first, he must make himself last of all and servant of all."

John Alexander writes, "A couple of years ago, I spent a month in Asia, mostly with people who had servants. And I didn't like what I saw. It gave me a sense of what servant living would be like.

"I don't want to be a servant.

"Servants are people who drive you to restaurants and sit in the car while you eat.

"Servants are people who run in from the next room to get the salt for you because it's a foot out of your reach. They wash your dirty underwear by hand. Sometimes they sleep in a closet or on the floor in the hall.

"And they always carry the luggage, which was a problem when I was there because I travel with a backpack—a heavy one—and

the servants never knew how to carry it. So they bruised their shins, and somewhere in Asia there's probably a servant who has a hernia from trying to lug my mysterious backpack. It would have been easier, especially on my self respect, to carry it myself – but they wouldn't hear of that."

I grew up in a house with a maid. For ten years Estela cooked, cleaned and cared for my family in Iquique, Chile. She was our family's servant. But over time she also came to occupy a special place in our hearts. When I returned to the town where I grew up after a 20-year absence, the first person I looked up was Estela. I had to walk the dusty streets of a city slum to find her, but it was my pleasure and privilege to meet her family, take them to a local professional soccer game that Sunday, and renew ties that only ten years of shared life can establish. My brother did likewise when he later returned, with even greater reason, as she was literally his nursemaid. And my sister will return to Iquique this Christmas, and I will be surprised if Estela is not one of the first people she visits. Which is simply to say, while there is much about being a servant that is unfair, ugly and unjust, the experience can be more complicated than that.

Alexander tells about being in a discussion on evangelism in a wealthy church. One woman said she knew so few people who weren't Christian that she didn't see how she could evangelize, and the other people agreed. Finally an outsider asked if most of their servants were Christian. After a silence, the answer came: "I never thought of them." Servants don't exist.

Estela never attended our church, even though our reason for being in Iquique, Chile was to spread the gospel. My parents were educational missionaries with the United Methodist Church. I suspect they invited Estela to church more than once. She never came. I didn't realize it at the time but she was a supporter of Salvador Allende, the socialist who

eventually was democratically elected President of Chile only to be overthrown and murdered by the Chilean army with the support and encouragement of the CIA and the United States government. We called Allende a communist. Estela may have been a communist too. Even when servants don't exist, they still manage to make their point.

Those who study missions tell a story about India. There many of the converts to Christianity are from the lowest rung of society. They are not from the lowest caste. They are below that—they are the outcasts. They are the garbage collectors, the people who pick up manure, and the ones who clean the toilets. In time the word Christian came to mean toilet cleaner, or so the story goes.

"A missionary was working with a Brahmin, an aristocratic Indian. The missionary gave a critique of Hinduism and offered arguments for Christianity. Finally he felt the person was ready, so he asked him whether he wanted to become a Christian. The Brahmin turned on his heel and left. Later the missionary realized the problem. He had asked the Brahmin whether he wanted to become a toilet cleaner, a person below caste.

That story is usually told to show that Christianity shouldn't become totally associated with any low status group, because of possible confusion. The Brahmin was angered because he didn't understand the question; he mistakenly thought he was being asked to be a toilet cleaner.

But I wonder. I wonder if maybe he did understand. Maybe he understood exactly. To become a Christian is to turn everything upside down, and that, especially for a Brahmin, means becoming a toilet cleaner; but he, like the rich, young ruler, wasn't about to do that.

God wants us to see life backwards, upside down and inside out.

Recently a friend asked what it would take for me to consider becoming one of the core members of this community. In the ten years I've participated in Seekers several have raised the same issue with me, often gently, usually with the kindest of intentions. Occasionally the challenge is more confrontational. As I told Patrick after his last sermon, it had been a long time since I had heard a "love it or leave it" sermon. But there is probably a need for those of us on the edges of Seekers to have our cages rattled every now and then. I'm not sure the invitation is really to be toilet cleaners any more, but the issues are not that different.

If I understand Jesus correctly he is inviting us to participate in backwardness training. He is telling us that we have it all backwards. The direction we are headed does not lead to life. What we need to do is to turn around completely and go the opposite way. This isn't about how far we can push the rules; it is about how far we can push ourselves. It is not about the least I can do and still be in good standing. It is about being totally available to others—unlimited liability. This is not about finding a fire escape from hell; it is about finding the spring of living water.

This is not because Jesus is some kind of masochist and needs for us all to inflict pain and suffering on ourselves in his behalf. Quite the contrary, Jesus knows the reality of evil and sin only too well. He experienced their reality on the cross. What Jesus is suggesting is that the best weapon against sin and evil is weakness and vulnerability. To fight evil with money, power and reputation is like trying to fight fire with gasoline. We need to enlist the poor, the weak and the nobodies in order to give sin and evil a serious battle.

A class in decision-making in the School of Christian Living gave life to this sermon several years ago. There I wrestled with Peter Block's **Stewardship**. He argues it is a term that we should use in place of leadership because it moves us from patriarchy to partnership. This call for partnership reminded

me of the priesthood of all believers. Probably by association the stewardship of all participants emerged as a phrase that captured much of what I was wrestling with. The struggle continues. It has been a slow process. But I want to work some more with it.

Jesus uses the image of stewards in a number of parables. Servants and stewards are positions Jesus identified with. They are given a job in another. Trust is at the heart of the matter. They are seldom the stars of the show. Often their responsibilities are menial. And Jesus seems to suggest that those who follow him should be comfortable with this.

Seven years ago I preached my first sermon on stewardship at Seekers. I discovered in my etymological dictionary that the word comes from the Old English *sty*, as in *pigsty*. A steward is a keeper of a *pigsty*. That reminded me of the story of the prodigal son. The connection between give and forgive jumped out. As these ideas rubbed against each other the proposition that stewardship is primarily about fear and risk emerged. This is the term that I want to work with in the context of mirrors of memory and icons of hope.

Bennett Sims tells this story in his new book **Servanthood**. "Long before there were bell buoys and electronic navigational aids, the fishermen of a village in Scotland used landmarks on the receding shore as guides for rowing out to the fishing grounds. Facing aft as they rowed, they watched for the exact alignment of two points on the skyline: the steeple top of the village kirk and the slowly emerging peak of the highest distant hill behind the town. They had to row far out from shore before these two points of reference precisely juxtaposed, but when they did they knew they had arrived. They deployed their gear and fished."

Ours is a rowboat religion. We make our way forward by facing backwards. Our hope points forward from any present moment. And yet hope's finest nourishment comes from the past. Like

the fishermen in that village, we make our way forward most confidently when we can keep dependable old landmarks in sight. The enduring wisdom in the central act of worship in the Christian tradition puts it this way, "Do this in remembrance of me."

It is fitting then that this person who called us to be servants, and stewards should have us look back to the place he gave this term in his life. Stewards are keepers of the pigsty, the people willing to care for the dirtiest forbidden animals in the most trying of circumstances. They understand the Sacred is more often found in awe than in answers. They know God often appears in the cracks and surprises of life. So they are willing to open wide the doors of access to Spirit. Neither Jew nor Gentile, neither male nor female, neither slave nor free is excluded. What God calls pure is good enough for us to take and eat. Stewardship shows the same preferential option for the lost, the least and the little that Jesus did.

When we look back at the life of Jesus, his insistence on inclusion demands our attention. He makes us beneficiaries of a compassion that refuses to demonize and exclude others. He sees the best in people without denying their worst. He liberates and enlarges others. As a servant leader he honors the personal dignity and worth of all who are led, and evokes their own innate creative power for leadership. Because this insistence on inclusion knows the world has become too small for violence and too precious to plunder, it defines success as giving and measures achievement by devotion to service.

A second point of reference when we look back is Robert K. Greenleaf. A number of things drew me to this man. I have heard Peter quote him so often that I felt I ought to know him. He wrote his own epitaph, which reads, "Potentially a good plumber, ruined by a sophisticated education." And he stated that one of the key events in his life was the realization that he had to start preparing for a useful old

age. He was a Quaker from Indiana who spent most of his life in New Jersey, married a potter and never tired of learning.

As a 66 year old he wrote an essay entitled Servant Leadership that many have called the only thing one needs to read on the subject. Some say he was smart enough to wait until he had something to say before putting anything in writing. He spent most of his life working for AT&T. After retirement he wrote and circulated the essay that not only is his claim to fame, but is also the piece from which Seekers draws its inspiration. He cites Church of the Savior as one of the practitioners of this style of leadership. Servant leadership measures itself by the growth and learning of others. Do those served become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely to become servants themselves? And by its effect on the least privileged in society. This businessman's exploration provides an important second point of reference for our rowboat religion.

If we juxtapose the life of Jesus and the writings of Robert K. Greenleaf we will necessarily arrive at our conspicuous imperfection. How can these seeming giants from the past inform our present? How can these mirrors of memory provide icons of hope? "The biggest hindrance to the high quality of leadership that honors the gifts and freedom of others is the fear of being found out for who we really are: people who are conspicuously imperfect. " Personal imperfections never disqualify an aspirant to servant leadership. Anyone can lead perfect people, if there were any. The real challenge is to learn to develop the imperfect people we all are.

When we juxtapose these two points of reference we are invited to open wider the doors to the Spirit. A rowboat religion will throw open the windows of access to the Sacred. If it were not for the ability of Jesus to juxtapose inclusion and service Christianity would still be a Jewish religion. We would still live according to a set of rules that attempts to limit, to separate, and to restrict God to the righteous, the holy and

the privileged. Or should we say the committed, the disciplined and the trustworthy? When we juxtapose these two points of reference we judge our leadership by how well it promotes the learning and growth of others. We measure ourselves by the least privileged in society. And once again, we will open wider the doors to the Spirit, and throw open the windows of access to the Sacred. Servant leadership builds bridges instead of fences. It sees that every wall is a door. And it seeks to use commitment as a springboard to participation rather than a fence of privilege.

Stewards know that if the means are merely replicas the results will be no more than imitations. Stewards are authentic; they are not defined by their title or their position. They bring spirit to life and offer it as a gift that enriches all they do. Stewards do not need to exceed themselves. It is enough to repeat themselves. They bring discipline to their task, not in the sense of rigid obligation but rather as a practice that aims to improve the range of the possible. Because they understand the difference between repetition and imitation, they are free to copy others and break the rules. They can honor or ignore the Sabbath, they can worship in the temple or the desert, and they can eat the forbidden or the customary, because it is their spirit that makes the difference.

A martial artist told his students this story,

"A customer wanted to buy a painting hung on the wall of an art gallery, but the tag on the frame indicated, 'Not for Sale.' The customer was so taken with the painting that he sought out the artist and commissioned another work 'just like the one that's not for sale.'

"A week later the customer returned to the gallery to pick up his order and saw what evidently was his painting leaning against the wall near the original. His copy was tagged 'Sold.' For a while he compared the two pieces of art with

great satisfaction, observing the extraordinary likeness of the two works; but after a few moments, he felt inexplicably drawn to the original on the wall. He addressed the painter, 'You know, there is something about the original there that I much prefer, even though I cannot describe what it is that attracts me, and I would very much appreciate it if you would sell me the original—now that you have a replacement.

"'Sorry,' said the painter, 'I do not wish to do that. I am fond of it, too, and now you have a very satisfactory copy.

"The customer said, 'Look, these two paintings share the same setting, scenery, colors, composition, brush strokes. Even the canvas and the frames are the same appearance and quality. They look alike as two drops of water. What then is the difference? Why will you not grant my simple wish?

"The artist explained. 'This painting that I am fond of is original. The painting you commissioned is an imitation. That is the difference.

"The explanation did not much help the customer. He argued, 'But the paintings are the product of the same artist. Both carry your signature!

"Yes, both carry my signature, but when I worked on the copy I was an imitator. That signature is the signature of an imitator, not of a creator. When I gave birth to the original, it became unique; only one can exist in the whole world. If anyone wants to make a copy of it, he can produce as many copies as he wants. A reproduction is an imitation of the original, but it is not the original. Originality happens but once and no more.

He then acknowledged he was the person who wanted to buy the original and added, 'That day I doubted the artist's interpretation and I regretted that time did not allow us to extend the discussion, but later I realized that the point the artist was arguing is akin to the Way.

"In martial art the traditional forms, the conventional routines, the basic techniques are designed to help the practitioner to get started, to get into the art. But in further training, the student's clinging to technique becomes a barrier to progress.

"In painting, all the accouterments—canvas, easel, paint, brushes, and so forth—are necessary for the artist to enter into the art; but when the painting begins, the artist must ignore both materials and technique. The artist must paint without thinking about materials and technique. Only then is the painting original.

"Conventional technique must be discarded. Because of the very process of fabricating it, the imitation must lack spirituality. The hands and the head are not enough to create anything unique if the heart is missing, for that which we call heart is the attribute of the spirit, the essential element of the true artist."

Different faiths make a similar point in their own way. "I do not seek to follow in the footsteps of the men of old; I seek what they sought." "I do not wish to dye my clothes saffron, the color of a holy order; I want to dye my heart with divine love." "When I get to heaven, they will not ask me why I was not Moses, but why I was not Zuzya." Each one of us must find our own way, at our own speed, in our own place. We are called to be originals, not imitations.

We are part of a tradition that has valued imitation. The Imitation of Christ is one of the classics of Western literature. Clearly it is a valuable piece of writing. But the stewardship of all participants invites us to explore the difference between imitation and repetition. Repetition imitates for its own purposes. Imitation repeats out of the need for approval. The sense of satisfaction in repetition is the choice itself, while in imitation the search is to

validate the choice by an appeal to an external example, authority or inspiration. If we would be servant leaders, we must be authentic. It is no longer enough to imitate Jesus, Greenleaf or Cosby. God has business he needs done in our time and place in ways only each of us can create.

The stewardship of all participants invites new understandings of commitment. Traditionally commitment means hard work. We have to sacrifice. If things are not falling into place we try harder. So we vacillate between self-manipulation and guilt. On the one hand we urge ourselves to greater effort, and on the other we fault ourselves for not being good enough. We hope somehow that the call to commitment will explain the cost of discipleship. Inasmuch as these understandings of commitment have helped people move beyond cheap grace, Christendom and easy church membership they have played an important role in our history. But the stewardship of all participants invites us to transform commitment into an icon of hope. This requires that will make way for willingness, discipline make way for practices, and these transform the power over into a power with.

For too long people have confused commitment with activity, with discipline. These are important dimensions of commitment. They cross the threshold of adventure and take the necessary first step toward inner transformation. They are expressions of the will. This kind of commitment seizes fate by the throat and does whatever it needs to in order to succeed.

Looking at commitment from the perspective of the stewardship of all participants, however, commitment is more a matter of willingness. We begin to listen to the inner voice. We trust the playing out of our destiny. We have the integrity to stand in a state of surrender. We are more certain of the direction than the goal. We pay attention to all that is going on around us. We never see the whole landscape, so we take the next tiny step and improvise on what we have learned. Antonio Machado captures this beautifully in his poetic phrase, "Seeker, there

is no path. You lay a path in walking."

Thus commitment viewed from the stewardship of all participants is not an invitation to disciplines, but to practices. It incorporates the principle of conspicuous imperfection, knowing that whatever direction we walk in, we will stumble and fall more than once. But if our will surrenders to willingness, we will get up and begin again, over and over.

Peter Senge describes it this way, "When this new type of commitment starts to operate, there is a flow around us. Things just seem to happen. We begin to see that with very small movements, at just the right time and place, all sorts of consequent actions are brought into being. We develop what artists refer to as an 'economy of means,' where, rather than getting things done through effort and brute force, we start to operate very subtly."

Some have described this as a commitment of being rather than a commitment of doing. It would broaden the integrity of membership with integrity of surrender, surrendering into commitment. Then we actualize commitment by listening, out of which 'doing' arises. Sometimes the greatest acts of commitment involve doing nothing but sitting and waiting until we know just what to do next.

Stewards are keepers of a gift and a grace not of their own making; they accept responsibility and they are keepers of the pigsty.

Stewards are keepers of a gift and a grace not of their own making. They open wide the doors of access to the Spirit. They are willing to go beyond the known. They are willing to move from a position of privilege to a place of partnership

Stewards accept responsibility. They are willing to make decisions. They know they will seldom have all the information necessary. They understand that the best decisions have bad

consequences. They realize that stewardship is first and foremost a training ground, a place of practice. Because practice transforms knowledge into action, stewardship is a space of commitment in which people practice together.

Stewards are accountable even when they aren't in control. It means having to keep score even when you don't make the rules. It means sharing information with others without any assurance of how it will be used. It means risking disapproval and rejection even when it isn't your fault. It means gambling that hope will triumph over experience.

Fundamentally life is beyond our control. Living through an earthquake, or any of life's shocking experiences, will quickly remind even the most powerful of this truth. But we can't refuse to use that as an excuse to give our best effort. We can give account of ourselves, even if we don't control the final outcome.