

## “A SERVANT’S PRAYER”

Lenten series – 6 (Service) - Palm Sunday

Exodus 32:15-24 (p. 86)

Luke 22:39-42 (p. 1022)

I want to talk with you today about servant leadership. I realize that may seem like an oxymoron. In many respects servants and leaders do seem to be antithetical. Yet in reality the best leader has a servant’s heart. The figure of Moses stands head and shoulders above all others in the Old Testament. He is the one who stood up to Pharaoh and said, “*Let me people go!*” and never backed down. He led his people through the Red Sea. He ascended the mountain to receive the law from God’s hand. No other Old Testament figure comes close.

Yet, to me, the incident that sealed Moses’ greatness as a leader occurred away from public attention; not in the heat of battle nor on a mountaintop. It happened, in fact, when he was alone, in the solitude of private prayer. But before we eavesdrop on Moses’ prayer, let’s briefly recreate the situation that occasioned it. Moses had been called to ascend Mount Sinai where he was to receive the Law from God. Joshua, his military chief-of-staff, had accompanied him part of the way up the mountain, then waited there for Moses to return. Meanwhile, Aaron, his secretary of state, had been left in charge of the people back at camp.

As Moses and Joshua were returning to the camp below, Joshua stopped and listened. Then he said, “*I think there’s trouble in camp. It sounds to me like war cries.*” Moses listened and replied, “*Those aren’t war cries. There’s trouble all right, but what you hear isn’t the sound of victory or defeat, it’s singing – and they’re not singing ‘Rock of Ages.’ That’s the sound of a party.*” And of course that’s exactly what it was; a 14-karat pagan orgy complete with dancing girls and all the trimmings.

When Moses arrived at camp and found God’s people cavorting around a golden calf, he nearly came unglued. He smashed the tablet of the Law. (I can imagine how, in his anger, he might have been thinking, “*Why bother to give God’s Law to a people who have no demonstrable self-control?*”) And then Moses in a holy rage, melted that golden calf, then ground it to powder, and then literally stuffed it down the people’s throats.

Then Moses turned to his second-in-command and said, “*Aaron, I left you in charge. Explain to me, please, how this happened.*” Aaron’s reply is the classic response of those who want to be absolved of any personal responsibility for their own behavior. They might blame fate, luck, karma, kismet, astrology, circumstances or whatever – the answer is substantially the same. Aaron replied,

*“Don’t get angry at me! The people just wanted a sense of protection out here in the wilderness – a sort of good luck charm, that’s all. So I told them, ‘If you have any gold jewelry, take it off.’ So they gave it to me – I threw it into the fire – and out came this calf.”* Right!

There’s a bloody fierceness at this point in the story that we cannot overlook and need not deny. To Moses, their very survival was at stake; so he forced their hand. Right then and there he made the people decide: either they were on the Lord’s side or they were as good as dead. As far as he was concerned this was a life-or-death issue. After breaking up that party, political common sense would dictate that Moses should have quietly resigned his post and let Aaron fill the unexpired term of office. After all, Aaron had certainly proven himself to be a man who could respond to the voice of the people.

But Moses didn’t resign, thank God. And because he didn’t buckle and because he stood solid in God’s behalf, he stands in biblical history as “the Prophet” – the prototype by which we would measure all men and women who would dare to represent God. Now, did Moses earn that status because of his devotion to God, regardless of the cost, regardless of public opinion? Does Moses stand as the paradigm of great leaders who understood that their leadership depended on themselves being led by God? The answer, of course, is Yes.

But there’s something more about this man, Moses. Part of Moses’ greatness is tied to an aspect of his character that really isn’t evident to the casual observer. But it is a characteristic mark that sets him above and apart from so many so-called great men and women. You’ll find the evidence tucked away in the closing verses of chapter 32. There we have the record of a little conversation between Moses and God that is so touching, and so memorable, and comes so unexpectedly, that the first time I read it, it sent a shiver down my spine.

After his brutal confrontation with the people, when things had cooled down, Moses did something that marked him forever as a great leader in God’s sight. He told the people that he would return to the mountain to talk with God, on the chance that he might be able to make atonement for their sins. In other words, he might be able to offer some sacrifice to heal the relationship with God that had been so abused.

So off went Moses, alone this time. There on that lonely mountain Moses offered a prayer, which, to me, is one of the watershed verses in the history of God’s people. This is what Moses prayed (at verse 31): *“Alas, this people have sinned a great sin; they have made for themselves gods of gold. But now, if you will forgive their sin –”* As far as I know, that is the only place in the Bible where you will find an incomplete sentence followed by silence. *“But now, if you will forgive their sin –”* (silence) It was a silence filled with the agony of a man whose

faith was torn between a willingness to take whatever God should give, and a fear of what this God might give.

And in the silence, the void that followed that unfinished sentence, Moses wrestled with this fundamental question about God's character: Is this God whom I serve, this Holy One who demands singular obedience, is this God the Almighty also God the Forgiving? Perhaps he is; but perhaps not. And even if he is forgiving, it may be that we've gone too far this time.

For an unspecified length of time that awesome silence continued. Have you ever felt that way in your prayers – where you've uttered an unfinished request to God, and what followed was nothing but silence? If you've had that experience, you might understand something of what Moses must have been going through just then.

Finally the silence was broken – but not by God. It was Moses who spoke. This man of God, in his compassion for this headstrong, disobedient people, made an offer. He said, “ – *and if not*, (that is, “if you will not forgive their sin”) *then, I pray you, blot me out of your book of life.*” There, men and women, we witness a quality of great leadership that is as needed as it is rare. To me, what marked Moses as a great leader was his compassion for those he had been called to serve. He was willing, if necessary, to lay down his life for them.

The Nineteenth Century social critic John Ruskin wrote words that seem singularly appropriate to Moses. Ruskin said: “*I believe the first test of a truly great man is his humility. I do not mean by humility, doubt of his own power. But really great men have a curious feeling that their greatness is not in them but through them. And they see something (of the) Divine in every other man; and are endlessly, foolishly, incredibly merciful.*”

Moses was the sort of great leader who was ready to lay down his life for those whom he had been called to lead. But it wasn't for Moses to make that decision. He knew that. The greatness of that man was his willingness, his availability. He knew that the decision was ultimately in God's hands, and there Moses was content to leave it. But you and I now know that God did decide how to deal with the willful disobedience of his people.

We whose hearts have been won by the Gospel know that, at just the right time, God chose to redeem the silence in Moses' prayer. In fact, God redeemed the silence in all such prayers at the staggering cost of his own Son. Part of the mystery of what God did for us in his Son is that, like Moses, Jesus wrestled in silent prayer with the same unanswered question. Alone in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus prayed, “*Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me – yet not my will, but yours be done.*”

The question implicit in the silence of Moses' prayer is the same question that weighs heavy on every human heart: “*God, are you willing to forgive my sin –*

*or have I gone too far?"* Every one of us has to deal with that question. But it is the deepest privilege of my life to tell you that in Jesus Christ God has already answered that question once – for all – forever. It was after that agonizing time of prayer in the Garden that Jesus fixed his eyes on the cross and beyond. And for reasons of love too deep for us to comprehend, God was actually in Christ, acting on behalf of the headstrong, the disobedient, the proud, the prodigal, the self-indulgent, the self-righteous, and the rest – among whom we are all numbered.

*"Will God forgive me?"* each of us longs to know. And from the cross, Jesus spoke on our behalf: *"Father, forgive them."* Like Moses, Jesus pleaded our case. But unlike Moses, Jesus was able to do for us what we could never do for ourselves; he saved our lives forever by allowing the weight of all our sins to blot out his name from the book of life. And if for that reason alone, Jesus is worthy not only of the title of great leader, but Savior and Lord as well.

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