

Proverbs 15:24-33  
Matthew 6:25-33

St. John's Presbyterian Church  
Devon, Pennsylvania  
Victor M. Wilson, D.Min., Pastor

Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time  
June 13, 2010, Baccalaureate Sunday

## SERVANT LEADERSHIP

But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness,  
and all these things will be given to you as well. *Matthew 6:33*

You graduates have all had a few science classes by now, in which you learned that when you break down this stuff we call matter, all it amounts to is a heap of airy nothing—there is nothing tangible there, just infinitely tiny wisps of dithering energy. Which, for me, confirms all the more compellingly Jesus speaking of the only true reality as the realm of the Spirit, which he called “the Kingdom of God.” Not a material kingdom of bricks and mortar, steel and concrete, even flesh and bone, but a way of being, a way of living and relating to each other.

When Jesus, in our gospel reading from Matthew's sermon on the mount, tells us to quit anxiety, worry, and a questing after things—the driving principles in our material culture—he is telling us there's a better way to live. A way of life that begins, oddly, not by grasping but by letting go. Grasping always has serious consequences because whenever we take hold of something to claim it, we are conditioned to have to protect what we call our own, whether it's property, power, influence, or political clout—even on the student council. Giving ourselves away, becoming *servant* leaders, makes no such claim. This was Jesus' way, not acquiring more stuff, but in letting it go. Not in traditional leadership that serves one's own or another's agenda, but in servant leadership. I think Rudyard Kipling, the author and quintessential Victorian Englishman, had this in mind when he addressed the graduating medical college class of McGill University in Montreal. Perhaps a hundred years ago, he told them, “You'll go out from here and very likely make a lot of money. One day you'll meet someone for whom that means very little. Then you will know how poor you are.”

These are heady times for all of us, especially our graduates, even scary times if you're fresh out of college and are feeling the pressure to find a job. Which makes the companionship of the only one who can really help navigate life all the more compelling. Our loving God whose counsel is not only wise beyond imagining, but infinite in resources. One whose genius and love formed and

breathed life into every fiber of your being, and whose infinitely subtle providence supplies you with food and clothing, shelter, family, friends and teachers. These are not the times to face an uncertain world with stoic independence. We need a God who—when we bring ourselves *not* to ask for things we merely desire, like an eight-year old in the candy aisle, but ask rather *to be a blessing* to others—opens pathways for us. A God in Jesus Christ who answers prayer with meticulous dexterity, in ways that would have been unimaginable to us beforehand. You must have experienced this. Something prayed for that has the integrity of Christ in it (which is why we are instructed to pray “In Jesus’ name,” not our own!) and out of the blue a set of unpredictable circumstances coalesce into an outcome of seamless grace. Answered prayers that leave us, in John Wesley’s sublime phrase, “lost in wonder, love and praise.”

I became a committed Christian at 1 a.m. on a winter’s night, before an ebbing coal fire thirty-eight years ago. What I’ve discovered over four decades since is that the more I trust God, the more I see how childlike has been the best of that journey. Discarding the bravado of youth, the thinness of self-congratulation in moments when I shone, and the discovery that I am at my very best, and I do my best when I trust God in all things. How I cherish the prospect of that for each of you.

If you would be true to your best self, give yourself away to others. Each time you do—you give God away because your best self is indistinguishable from the God who is within you, in whose image, after all, we are all created (Genesis 1:26-27, 2:7, 5:3; Ps 82:6-7)

If this sounds merely esoteric—it’s far from it! You only have to look to your own experience. Do you remember what it felt like on a mission trip, for instance, or in some volunteer capacity to do something that brought real gratitude to another. Do you recall helping someone out of the blue, and the thrill you felt because you gave a piece of your self away that had great value to another? When we seek only to acquire things, nothing is going out. That’s why so often they soon feel so hollow and meaningless. We can all remember the feeling the day after Christmas.

One of the first things that *servant* leadership teaches us is that we cannot really change anything. Oh, we can perhaps make a system a bit more efficient, or tweak the sales targets up a bit, but real change, people change, not really. You graduates are all adults now, so let me share with you an adult story from M. Scott Peck. Your parents may remember him from his best selling *The Road Less Travelled*, in the mid 80’s. This is from his *A World Waiting to be Born*. He’s getting counsel from an older nun about his failing marriage.

Sister Lucia beamed. “Oh, that’s just wonderful,” she exclaimed.

“Lord, Scott,” I thought, “get a couple of drinks in you and you go shooting your mouth off simply because this nun’s got a kindly old face, when the reason it’s so kindly is probably because she’s got no brain left behind it.” I spoke to her again, more loudly now, the way one does to the senile. “No, no, you didn’t understand me. I was telling you I’ve failed at my marriage.”

Again Lucia beamed. “Oh, I’m so glad for you, “ she answered.

By this time I was becoming seriously annoyed. I practically shouted at her, “No, no, you haven’t heard what I’ve been saying. Probably you’ve got a hearing problem. You’re quite entitled to have a hearing problem at your age, my dear. But, anyway, you haven’t understood anything that I’ve said, so let’s just drop the subject.”

“I’ve heard and understood you perfectly, young man,” Sister Lucia responded, looking at me keenly. “You’ve been telling me that you have failed at your marriage, and I’m so glad for you. Do you know how terrible it would be never to fail? Oh, that would be dreadful!”

I recollected certain people I’d known who felt that they had never failed and thought of just how insufferable they were, and I began to think that maybe she did have some gray matter left behind those intelligent eyes.

It is also, I think, no accident that my marriage with Lily began to considerably improve along about that time. For what happened after I’d concluded I’d failed at my marriage was that, on a certain level, I gave up trying to make it work. And, that meant I gave up trying to change Lily. It was also around that time that Lily decided she too had failed at the marriage, and also stopped trying to change me. Furthermore, I suspect it is no accident that since that time, both she and I seem to have done a good deal of changing.

Do you see what I mean about letting go—and letting God?

May the best self within you be willing to let go, and remain faithful. Then, watch what happens!

Amen.