Leadership in the Kingdom

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Year B, Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 24
Mark 10:35-45
Grace Episcopal Church, Pemberton and St. Martin-in-the-Fields, Lumberton, NJ

In our Gospel passage for today, two of Jesus' disciples become very demanding. James and John, the sons of Zebedee, approach Jesus and say to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." This does sound like a pleasant request, but an outright, almost demand. Jesus, however, is patient with them, giving them a listening ear. He asks, "What do you want me to do for you?" And what is it that James and John demand? They say, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory."

Basically, they are asking for high positions of leadership in the Kingdom of God.

I can imagine what James and John thought leadership would be like in the Kingdom. They would be sitting right next to Jesus, ruling over the citizens of the Kingdom. Jesus would march into Jerusalem, overthrow the big, bad Romans, save Israel from occupation, and they would have the best seats in the house.

Upon hearing this request, the ten other disciples become angry with James and John. This should seem familiar; the disciples like to argue over who is the greatest among them. Maybe that other ten disciples wanted the power that James and John were seeking, and they thought they were too late in asking. Jesus, however, tells them leadership is different in God's Kingdom. Leadership in the Kingdom was not like they see in their world, a hierarchy where rulers lord their power over others. Rather, leadership comes from underneath. "Whoever wishes to become great among you must be a servant," Jesus says, "and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all." Leadership does not depend on power and prestige, but on how you love and serve others.

We human beings have an innate desire to be leaders. We enjoy holding positions of authority. We like to have power and control. In our world, more power and control lead to more success and more wealth. Leadership is seen as something that is top down, with the most successful and wealthy at the top, and those with less left to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. But in the Kingdom of God, things get turned upside down. Our cultural norms are turned upside down. Our traditions are turned upside down.

In God's Kingdom, true leadership is not measured by how many are under you, or by your success and wealth, or by a title you may have. True leadership is measured by how you love. Leadership is measured by how you serve. Leadership means putting aside your own self-validation and desires to see that others are blessed before yourself. It means shining a spotlight on others so they may receive the best. It is a leadership that Jesus exemplifies on the cross. Out of love, Jesus empties himself of his desires and gives his life so we may be blessed and receive the best thing possible, an eternal relationship with God.

Ask yourself, who has God put around you to lead like Jesus? Leadership that involves service and love has the power to give a taste of heaven to our chaotic and hurting world. Amen.