

Commentary on the Gospel for Wed, Mar 4th 2015

I love the image I have painted in my mind of Pope Francis, just months into his papacy, tiptoeing out of the Vatican into the darkened streets of Rome dressed as a “common” priest just so that he can minister directly to the poor and vulnerable. Reports of these ministerial escapades came on the heels of his very first general audience as pope in which he said: “God came out of himself to come among us, he pitched his tent among us to bring to us his mercy that saves and gives hope. Nor must we be satisfied with staying in the pen of the 99 sheep if we want to follow him and to remain with him; we too must ‘go out’ with him to seek the lost sheep.” Regardless of how you feel about Francis theologically or politically, you have to agree that he is walking the talk of servant leadership.

As we move into the middle of this second week of Lent, today’s Gospel and that of yesterday and tomorrow feature Jesus not mincing words about servant leadership. This model of leadership is one of Jesus’ greatest legacies. He flipped the perception of how leaders engaged their power entirely on its head when he said things like, “Whoever wishes to be great among you shall be your servant...The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve” (MT 20:26, 28) and “The greatest among you must be your servant” (MT 23:11). Even today this style of leadership is counter-intuitive to our modern minds.

While it can be difficult to find people using their power as leaders for the betterment of others above themselves, they do exist if we look closely. For example, as an undergraduate student, I saw the president of Creighton University, Fr. Michael Morrison, SJ, daily spend time sitting in front of St. John’s Church in the heart of campus. Myself and countless peers sought him out in times of need and we always knew where to find him. Now as a staff person at Creighton, I see servant leadership being modeled by our students. In a recent conversation with a small group of our students I was inspired by what they told me about the various ways they serve the community weekly: Listening to troubled stories of youth as a counseling intern at a middle school, teaching children with autism to dance, and offering a ministry of presence, support and love to undocumented workers within a county jail. Talk about living out the challenge from Jesus and Pope Francis to “get out of the pen”!

Lent is a time to consider sacrifices we make with our time, talent, and treasure in order to lift up those around us and, in so doing, deepen our relationship with God. If we are going to do this well, it behooves us to heed the prompting of St. Ignatius of Loyola in the third week of the Spiritual Exercises. He invites us to stay close to Jesus as he makes his way to Jerusalem — a time when many began to leave him behind because of fear, boredom or mistrust. And what does this accompaniment to the cross look like? The answer lies, once again, in Pope Francis’ first general audience:

“Following Jesus means learning to come out of ourselves in order to go to meet others, to go towards the outskirts of existence, to be the first to take a step towards our brothers and our sisters, especially those who are the most distant, those who are forgotten, those who are most in need of understanding, comfort and help.”

Let us each and all take an honest look at our lives here in Lent and the call we each have to be servant leaders. We can discover how it is that we are being called to go out of ourselves by talking with Jesus about three key questions St. Ignatius places in the first week of the Spiritual Exercises:

What have I done for Christ?

What am I doing for Christ?

What ought I do for Christ? ?

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