

February 1, 2015 – 4th Sunday of Epiphany

“*Light From Darkness: Care and Compassion*” - Rev Seth D. Jones ©

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 8; Mark 1:21-29

When I was in seminary at United Theological Seminary in Minneapolis, in the early 1990s, I took a class on Christianity and Economics. The professor had all kinds of contacts in the business community and so we were able to hear from several people from the various companies in the area. Occasionally, CEOs would take the class. One of the most interesting speakers was Ken Melrose, who was the CEO of Toro Company, the lawn mower people.

Back then, the big movement in Christian business circles was what was called “*servant-leadership*”. This was a big deal for Mr. Melrose and he organized the entire company around this principle, all of it developed from his Christian experience and faith. Servant leadership is very simply the attempt to apply the apparent leadership examples of Jesus Christ to the everyday world of business and management. It is a way of leading from behind.

Servant leadership presumes everyone has experience and talent that will help the organization. It presumes everyone has a voice that demands respect and attention. It presumes that everyone is a person seeking spiritual wholeness in family, faith, and especially their work. From the least paid to the highest paid, servant leadership seeks to erase the traditional hierarchies of the business world and instead lets the entire organization become a decision making body for the sake of each person's greater being. Ken required all management level and higher to spend at least a day a year on the floor of the employees, seeing what they had to deal with day-to-day. This reverses the normal business model which is completely focused on the customer first. This is focused on the people who are employed by the organization first, then trusts that the commitment to excellence which has been shown them will naturally create excellent customer service.

Mr. Melrose worked hard to instill this culture at Toro and Toro still has a reputation for this way of working. It is impossible to find a job there because no one ever leaves the company. One of the things I remember Mr. Melrose telling us was when there was a huge layoff that had to happen. He did this once in the traditional way – the hacking away method with no regard for people that many of you may have experienced in your work life. And he decided never again.

After that, whenever a downsizing was imminent, Mr. Melrose would gather the entire company into a large room. They would bring in lunch and coffee. Everyone would sit down and Ken would outline the situation. Then he would present the options available, along with the bottom line that needed to be met. Then they would take as long as it took for the entire company to figure out how to meet the needs of the company – some would take early retirement, some were able to work less hours in a week, some were confident in finding work elsewhere. The point being they all worked it out together as an organization, as a group of people who had committed to listening and serving one another.

In Corinth, Paul is dealing with a new church that has no idea of how to lead one another, much less be an example to the outside world. This part of his letter sounds

like it is just about food and people who are weak in the faith, but it is really about power and freedom, serving and leading. Power and freedom in Christ do not look like power and freedom in the world. The new converts in Corinth believed, because they were now free in Christ, they were free to do whatever they wanted. They believed the power of the Holy Spirit and the freedom they now had was *for them*. They ate whatever they wanted. They spoke however they wanted. They took great pride in what they now knew – that Jesus Christ had come to free them and the power they now had was from God through the Holy Spirit.

We know our care and compassion flow directly from Christ. But there are problems in Corinth with how people have used their new knowledge. Paul has very little tolerance for this kind of misuse of spiritual power. His smack-down is quick and clear - *“knowledge puffs up, but love builds up”*. Socrates, one of the great philosophers of Greece, said the basis of all knowing is knowing you don't know. Paul paraphrases this to the Corinthians, reminding them of their philosophical roots. And then he flips everything over. *“If anyone loves God, they are known by God”*. The source of all that we know comes from God, and we really only know one thing about God – because of what Jesus Christ has done for the world, we know God loves us. Not only is the root of all our knowledge God and God's love for us, the only true foundation of our knowledge is love itself. And by Jesus' own command to his followers, we only really know Jesus is present when we are loving one another.

If we look at Jesus' life and how he led others, we see someone who does not force himself or his concerns on others. Instead, he loves them and builds them up so they can become the person God truly wishes them to be. This is the essence of servant leadership. Jesus serves others. *“The son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mt 20:28)*. Jesus leads by serving. That is the model Paul is trying to impress upon the Corinthians. The care and compassion we show for others is directly related to our willingness to serve one another. We serve one another because we are loved by God, and the love of God is shown to us by the servant ways of Jesus Christ.

So we really don't get to do whatever we want because we are free and empowered by the Holy Spirit. The mistake the Corinthians have made is that they believe the power and freedom of the Holy Spirit is *for them, personally*. Yes, Jesus came for each one of us, but now that we know *“there is one God, the Father...and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom we are all things and we are through him” (1 Cor 8:6)*, others can only know the love God has for them by our service to them. Really, God's freedom and power is for others, not us. We are the channel whereby others come to know God's freedom and power. We are conduits for the sake of Christ.

Knowledge is a tight-rope act. I like acquiring knowledge and I like knowing things. I would have done well in Corinth, before the advent of the Christians. It is my kind of city – artsy, multi-cultural, health-conscious, a center of learning. It is happening. Without anything to ground my acquisition of knowledge, though, my life, especially my spiritual life, is all about me and what I know.

Knowledge grounded in love and in the recognition that I am known foremost by God, however, means everything I know and everything I do with all that knowledge means nothing unless it reflects God's love - God's love in service to others. Ken Melrose says it this way when he was asked about power: *“Real power comes to you as a leader when you give your power to others around you, and then power is imputed to*

you by the others. This is how Jesus became powerful as an itinerant carpenter.”¹

The thing is what we know as Christians is really all about a relationship, not a body of knowledge like all the books of theology on my wall in my office or the section devoted to world religions at the library. What we know is a relationship to the person through whom God has chosen to reveal himself – Jesus Christ.

This is the *teaching with authority* that the Scribes notice with Jesus in the synagogue. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus doesn't teach a body of knowledge – he teaches the outcome of a relationship with him. The man with the unclean spirit in the synagogue is Jesus' first miracle in Mark's Gospel, and it is also the announcement of Jesus' ministry. In all the other Gospels, Jesus announces his ministry with the words of Prophets or a lesson to the people. Here though, he presents himself.

The synagogue is always a place of teaching. Back in Jesus' day, the men would gather at the synagogue, a prayer would be said, then a text would be read, and then a teaching would happen about the text. And that was it.

On this day, as Jesus heals in the synagogue, Jesus is the text and the teaching is care and compassion for others, the healing of body, mind and soul by way of the power of God. It is as if Jesus is saying, *“You used to know God through a body of teachings and writings. That got you to this moment. Now, you will know God through a person”*. All of us know that knowing a person is very different than knowing algebraic topology or edible mushrooms or the history of great battles. People are mysterious. They change; they grow; they reverse what they said. When we choose to get to know a person, we are choosing what we know about the person right now; but we are also choosing to accept what we do not know and what we will find out about them. We willingly choose, as Paul says later in 1 Corinthians 13, to *see through a glass, darkly*.

The challenge for us in today's readings is understanding the foundation of our knowledge and its purpose. Why do we gather here to worship God? What do we come to know in that time together? What shall we do with what we know?

For Paul, the answers to those questions all came down to care and compassion. If you take time to read what people leaving the church have to say about why they leave, many of the complaints are about the self-centered nature of the church. It is all about *me*. We will leave behind for the moment the self-centered act of leaving a community one has committed to because it is going through a hard time. The critique is still valid. Paul is telling the Corinthians and us, it is really not about you at all. All these things you are doing – eating whatever you want, saying whatever you want, even doing whatever you want – because of your freedom in Christ are really self-serving. Those new to the faith, or 'weak in conscience' as he says, will see this and rapidly lose what little hold they have on the faith because of the dissonance between what they expected and what is actually happening.

And then Paul asks, *“Do you really want to be that person, the one who is responsible for causing your brother or sister to sin?”*

Back in the synagogue, Jesus presses the Scribes to see that the teaching of God is really not about God's chosen people. God's chosen people are a vehicle for the light of God to the world. Only the cleansed and those pronounced clean can enter the synagogue. The conundrum of this story in Mark is, *“If no unclean thing can enter the*

¹ From an interview with The High Calling:
<http://www.thehighcalling.org/leadership/giving-servant-leadership-works-interview-ken-melrose>, dated Feb 6, 2007. Accessed January 30, 2015.

synagogue, how did an unclean spirit get into the synagogue?" The answer is a kind of circular one: So Jesus could show the Israelites that God's love is for those who cannot enter God's kingdom according to human rules, those who will not enter because of human thoughts or have been excluded from God's chosen people because of human prejudice.

The church of Christ exists to bring people into it. It does not exist for the people who are already in it. In our worship, in our teaching, in our gathering together, it is always with the intention that those who are new to faith, who are 'weak in conscience', who are 'unclean' will see the light and the love of God through Jesus Christ and will seek the care and compassion that God seeks to share with all humankind. This happens through us. This happens because God chose you and I to be the light of Christ in the world.

Amen.