

Empower Servant Leadership

Opening Prayer

Almighty God,

By the work of your hands, you created all that is good. You formed us in Christ's image, and you fashioned us with spiritual gifts according to your will. "What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor" (Psalm 8:4-5). Created in your image, Lord, we have been made to serve and glorify you. Lord, help us to strengthen our gifts, and live empowered by your Spirit. Help us to find strength in serving one another, for we can accomplish far greater things in your name. And may we be your disciples, who help nurture and encourage the gifts of all others, without envy or strife. God, we know the harvest is plentiful, so make us to laborer together in the grace and love of Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

Scripture: John 13: 1-20

- *Have someone read scripture passages allowed.*
- *Allow time for silence to read on your own. Highlight key words, phrases, images that speak to you.*
- *Take a few moments to share those with a partner or with the entire group.*

Background

Jesus, knowing that His hour to "depart out of this world to the Father," gathers with the disciples around table fellowship in this ultimate act of love. This narrative of Jesus begins "the Book of Glory" (chps. 13-21) leading to the crucifixion. Christ, as teacher and Savior, leads by example in this symbolic act of washing the feet of his beloved disciples. This memorable act of service is one of equality, one where there is no social status among the company, and our Savior is humbled in service. Gerard Sloyan writes, "Being bathed by Jesus means being symbolically taken into the event of the cross. It is likewise a model of service for the disciples." In this event, we see that we must be washed clean by our Savior, and in turn, we are sent out to do the very same.

This is the call for the people of God to practice Empowering Servant Leadership. Yet it is a rite of those who believe, who witness and testify to the final hours of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Notice, John begins this "Book of Glory" by stating that "Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end" (vv. 1). Jesus showed great love to the end, to the ultimate expression of washing the feet of the disciples whom Christ loved. We remember that the table was prepared and the invitation extended to the Savior who bids us come, but John's gospel message reminds us that the Savior is also the servant, leading by this ultimate example of love. For all who are in Christ, who have been created in the image of Christ and cleansed by the blood of our Savior, we are empowered and gifted by the same Spirit that was in Jesus to be Servant Leaders. It is not just in some, but all who are beloved disciples to the very end.

Reflect

- *Take a few moments to respond to the questions below. Share with one another as partners or the whole group.*
1. What does it mean that Jesus washed the disciples' feet, even Judas and Peter, as one of His final hours?
 2. Can you name your spiritual gifts? How do you use them for servant leadership to the glory of Christ?
 3. Recall a time when someone exercised servant leadership in a way that inspired you?
 4. How does your church cultivate, nurture, and support servant leadership?
 5. What gets in the way of all disciples using their spiritual gifts for servant leadership?

Closing Prayer:

- *Allow individuals to name joys and concerns in their daily discipleship*
- *Offer prayers for your particular faith community focusing on the challenges, the hopes, and the triumphs of Empowering Servant Leadership.*

Additional Resources:

- Janet O. Hagberg, *Real Power: Stages of Personal Power in Organizations* (Salem, WI: Sheffield Publishing Company, 2003).
- Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: a Journey Into The Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (Mahwah, NY: Paulist Press, 1991).
- James H. Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America: a Dream or a Nightmare* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999).
- N. Graham Standish, *Becoming a Blessed Church: Forming a Church of Spiritual Purpose, Presence, and Power* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2005).
- Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2002).

Additional Videos:

- Simon Sinek – Why good leaders make you feel safe (TED talk)
https://www.ted.com/talks/simon_sinek_why_good_leaders_make_you_feel_safe
- Orkidstudio – EMPOWERMENT (Nakuru Project in Kenya)
<https://vimeo.com/113384190>
- Ken Blanchard – Servant Leadership (London Business Forum)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ctZHSa4Qhd4>
- Theocademy – Being Leaders (Ordered Ministry series)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=275&v=VICZ4qownvI

Suggestions for Age-Appropriate Praxis:

For children, emphasize that foot washing was one of the dirtiest jobs back in Jesus' day. Talk about "dirty jobs" today (i.e. scrub toilets, mop floors, pick up trash, clean dishes, etc.) and ask them what it would look like if they saw Jesus doing those jobs. Talk about examples of how Jesus leads, but also serves.

For youth, focus on Jesus' question (v. 12) "Do you know what I have done for you?" How can we learn about servant leadership from Jesus' actions in the room that night? How can we about servant leadership learn from what Jesus has already done so far in his ministry? How can we learn about servant leadership from what Jesus is about to do?

For younger adults, look for examples of servant leaders (past and present) who have impacted the world. Talk about what made them a servant leader and question how their impact might have been different if they had not been. Discuss qualities of servant leaders they have seen in mentors and they might see in each other.

For seasoned adults, discuss servant leadership alongside of Jesus' statement (v. 17) "If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them." Ask for examples of how servant leadership not only is beneficial for the world, but beneficial for the servant leader as well. How can servant leadership change over a lifetime (teen, working years, retirement, etc.)?

Suggested Engagement Opportunities to Further Explore:

- sit around the outside of a children's swimming pool and take turns washing each other's feet
- look for opportunities to volunteer "behind the scenes" in an attempt to embody service
- read your congregational mission statement and ask what leadership might be helpful
- begin a collection of soaps, shampoos, and towels to give away
- plan a church-wide supper before your next Maundy Thursday service to break bread together
- identify and name servant leaders you know – write them a thank you letter