

“Service at work”, a sermon preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright on Pentecost 21, 18 October 2015, based on Hebrews 5:1-10; Mark 10:35-45

I have seen the difference the spirit of service makes in a workplace. I have seen a group transformed.

From being a group of people where each focused on their own piece of work, their own tasks, their own role – needing to get this piece of work complete, this responsibility fulfilled; where they have seen themselves as alone, not really connected or of help to the others in the team.

Then by various means, the workplace emerged with new people. And these people have sought to help the whole group work together. I have seen them anticipate what others need to do their job and have tried to provide it. They have thought about the encouragement others have needed and found ways to give it. They have found ways of sharing information and being responsive to the needs of others in the workplace. As far as they have been able, in their own roles, they have put in place alerts and systems and processes and built relationships so that everyone gets what they need to achieve. And a spirit of helping each other has grown. They have realised their own success depended on how everyone was working together, not just as individuals. A champion team not a team of champions. And the group has become a team, more trusting and respectful of each other, more ready to support, more willing to share insights and information, more united in serving customers and clients and people who engaged with them

So much so that others commented on it.

People bringing that spirit to a work place, the spirit of service, can make all the difference.

Perhaps it's the same journey Jesus puts before James and John, before us.

James and John start with the question - “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.”

Special seats, at the front of the room.

Jesus simply responds “You do not know what you are asking.”

They didn’t. The glory of Jesus was the cross.

And the two who were eventually alongside him on the cross were two criminals, crucified with him.

You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to go through a life lived for others? Are you able to drink the cup that I drink?

When the other disciples heard about what James and John had asked, they got angry.

Was it because they felt left out? Was it because they did not think of this first? Was it because they did not want to see some rewarded over themselves?

The way of Jesus challenged the way of the time. Roman society thrived on the exercise of power. Power enforced by threat and intimidation, by bribery and currying favour, by command and control.

Power accessed in ways we know today – through education and status, through looks and the company we keep.

Martin Luther King talked about “The Drum Major Instinct”, the instinct to lead the parade, to enjoy the limelight, to be on the front page.

Jesus overturns that instinct.

“Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant.”

Margaret Wheatley emphasises that we lead through the power of our relationships. Relationships built from a deep sense of our shared struggles and humanness; not from superiority or a sense of being better than other people, but from our vulnerabilities and wonderings, by being with people, alongside them, rather than trying to fix them.

Wheatley highlights how, in our shared struggles and openness, we gain personal courage, courage from each other. Personal courage is one of the hardest gifts to sustain at work. Especially when we are rebuffed or ridiculed or it’s made clear that what we want to say is not welcomed.

Many women know that when they try to speak in a male dominated environment.

How hard it is to find the right words, the right way, the right time, the right tone, in order to win acceptance in the culture of the office or the school or wherever our workplace is.

Every workplace needs people with personal courage. Every work place relies on us acting and speaking with personal courage, to express our view, to share information, to name a vision, to stand against the things we know are wrong and for the things we know are right, being available to each other.

Helping move a workplace from a place of fear to a place of, dare I say it, love; from a place of anxiety to a place of openness. I have seen it happen and I have seen it not happen.

Julian of Norwich: "We must speak with a million voices; it is the silence that kills."

And to bring into our workplaces, more voices, voices not commonly heard, voices too quickly dismissed, from people normally too afraid to speak, people pushed to the edge unheeded.

Robert Greenleaf advised managers for over forty years. He put together two seemingly contradictory ideas, leadership and servanthood. He developed the idea of servant leader.

"The servant-leader is servant first. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant – first to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served.

Here is a text for every workplace, for every worker, for every church.

"For the son of man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."