

## **Unfelt Authority**

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Every community has its leaders. Leaders organize, direct, and set the tone for their followers. No matter how much we may dislike some of our leaders, without them, not much would ever get done. It is not surprising that the Church has leaders, too. I don't think Jesus was against leadership, no matter how hippie we try to make him out to be!

While Jesus did approve of leadership, in our Gospel from *Mark* today he does make a key qualification to leadership in the Christian community: "you cannot make your authority felt." He says this in response to the controversy caused by James and John when they asked him for the seats of honor in heavenly glory. They wanted to be the most powerful of the twelve apostles. As Jesus said, "you know that those who are recognized as rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them...But is shall not be so among you." In other words, you need to be leaders, but not in a way that makes others feel inferior to you or like second-class citizens. Don't let the fact that you are a leader go to your head.

Leadership in a Christian community is not about personal power. The leaders who need to assert their power are often the ones who shouldn't be trusted with it. They will use it to control, manipulate, and even oppress their followers. The saddest part of it all, oftentimes they don't even realize that they're doing it because they are so wrapped up in themselves. Their authority is a felt authority.

Christian leadership is much gentler. It is a form of service where the leader is one with the flock. Christian leaders, whether ordained or lay, are not so much concerned with personal power or controlling everything as they are with stepping back to see what God wants to do in, with, and through the community. It is an unfelt authority.

The psychologist M. Scott Peck, in his book *The Different Drum*, speaks of healthy leadership in communities. His perspective is a lot like Jesus'. He says, "to be an effective leader I must spend most of the time sitting back, doing nothing, waiting,

letting it happen.” (99) This is not at all to say that a leader should be disengaged, in his or her own world, or lazy. What it does mean is that an effective leader doesn't have to be so aggressive with their authority. They don't have to fight for power or force something to happen. They don't have to make their authority felt. On the contrary, true leaders use their power to empower others. In fact, Peck goes so far as to say that in a healthy community, everyone becomes a leader.

*The Church is a community where none of us should feel the need to make our authority felt.*

Do I try to make myself superior to others in the community? Of course some people in leadership have to use their authority and make difficult decisions. But let us remember that we cannot lord ourselves over others, for we only have one Lord, and that Lord came to serve, not to be served.