

Our scriptures today are all about leadership and power. Few topics have captured more interest throughout the course of history. They certainly didn't escape the notice of James and John in the gospel, either. Jesus used their grasping for leadership and power to explore not so much how leaders lead, but what motivates them to do so. Exploration like this takes us deep into the heart of the Eucharistic mystery of God's love.

Rebuking James and John, Jesus turns conventional notions about power and leadership on their head. For Jesus, leadership is achieved through service, and power is realized through powerlessness. Prestige and personal aggrandizement don't play.

Many years ago, I got some insight into what this servant leadership might look like through a Christopher News Note that some of you might've read too. The News Note quoted a poem by Lao Tzu that goes like this:

A leader is best when people barely know he exists,
Not so good when they obey and acclaim him,
Worst when they fear and despise him.
Fail to honor people and they will fail to honor you.
But of a good leader, who speaks little,
When the job is done and his aim is accomplished,
The people will say: "We did it ourselves."

Not much prestige at work there, I think you'd agree, and the only power we see operating is the power of many people's energy directed to accomplishing a goal they've been convinced is worth achieving. The Christophers used the poem to illustrate Jesus' point that the best motivation for leadership and the exercise of power is not prestige and domination, but the service of love.

Some time ago, a group of us were chatting about memorable bosses we'd had over the years, both good and bad.

"I remember working for this one woman we all used to call Attila the Hen," my friend Ernie told me. "She was the kind of person for whom anyone's very best never seemed to be good enough. It wouldn't have been so bad if she hadn't been a screamer, too, and sarcastic. It was all

about how good she looked, not us. I don't know how she got to where she'd gotten, but after just a few weeks on the job I knew I had to leave."

Our buddy Steve nodded with understanding and told us about a boss who had a quote from Niccolo Macchiavelli hanging in his office that read 'It is better to be feared than to be loved.' "I don't think he ever physically poisoned anyone," Steve said, "but you could get pretty sick just watching him operate behind other people's backs. I didn't stay there very long myself."

When it was our friend Kevin's turn, he said he'd decided to share a different kind of story. "When I first started out in computers," he told us, "all there was were mainframes – big bulky, complicated and poorly documented. Most of us had to learn everything on the job."

"My first boss was a man by the name of Gene. He was a very likable person – tremendously encouraging, with deep faith and what we'd call an 'interesting' sense of humor. We hit it off immediately. I told him that I was pretty new to all this, and would be grateful for all the help I could get. Gene liked that and told me "I'm going to help you become the best systems guy you can be. Sometimes I'm going to throw you in over your head, but all you ever have to do is ask for help though, and I'll be there for you."

Then he said something I'll never forget. "Don't think of me as your boss," Gene told me. "In fact, I don't want you to be intimidated by my experience or title either, so from here on in," he said with a wink, "just call out for your 'Slave' when you need me. We'll both know what you mean." We laughed together at that and I told him it sounded pretty disrespectful, but he insisted, telling me with a grin that he was making me promise to do that because he thought it would take care of some other problems he had to deal with, too."

"When we first started, the rest of the staff was taken aback by me calling Gene my "Slave." Then they found it funny. Then I noticed them quietly begin to examine some of their own behaviors. A couple of guys who'd imagined themselves to be legends in their own minds and better than everyone else began to back off their angrily superior, dismissive attitudes and actually began to answer questions politely and become helpful to us new folks. If Gene could be a slave, they could be slaves, too. Maybe even better slaves."

“A few of the other newbies stared to ask them about the way things worked, got good answers, and began to hope that they, too, could get confident at this job. A community was beginning to form in the unit where before there had been division, fear and isolation. It dawned on me one day what those other problems Gene had to deal with had been. He’d solved them by becoming ‘The Slave.’”

“So it went for almost two years, as we developed our sea legs together under the guidance of a master technician and a fabulous leader. Gentle when he needed to be gentle, direct when there was call for that, but always ‘The Slave,’ not only to me, but to all of us, whenever anyone, even the geniuses, needed help. Consciously or unconsciously we all became each other’s slaves, each in his or her own way.”

“The day came when Gene didn’t show up for work. It emerged that Gene had suffered a sudden, massive heart attack and died on his way to work. The letter from Gene’s widow came to us later that month. She told us Gene had been so proud and grateful of the way our group had come together. We were, she told us, his most significant achievement.”

“Being a religious guy, Gene had told his wife he led our group the way he thought Jesus would lead it, and they’d laughed together over his nickname, “The Slave.” Her letter ended on a serious note though. He’d told his wife that if he ever died on his way to work or somewhere, to make sure that someone told his people that he loved them. She’d promised to do so, and so she had. Our leader, ‘The Slave,’ had loved us, just as he had been loved by Jesus and asked to love those he led.”

Every one of us is at various times in life a leader. What kind of leaders are we? Who are we more inclined to follow - Jesus or Machiavelli? Are we leading each other deeper into the fulness of the community of God’s love, or have we chosen a different path? Here’s a challenge for you that can help you answer those questions – just for fun, after mass, tell a few people you love that you’re their slave and ponder the reaction you get, from them and from within yourself. You’ll learn a lot about what kind of leader you are, and you won’t be alone. James, John and Jesus will be watching.