

“Inflation & the Cycle of Blessings: The Currency of Gracious Leadership”

John 13:13-17

Healthy and gracious leadership seems to be in short supply nowadays in many of our human systems, especially as we look at the problem of rapid inflation. Look at the example of failed leadership in England where they have had so much turmoil over leadership. When Liz Truss was elected in September, she came in guns blazing with an aggressive financial plan which she believed to be the answer to all of the economic woes of her country. She came in thinking that she knew all the answers by planning aggressive tax cuts which shook global markets and crashed Britain’s economy. Here is a video of her defending her policies.

[U.K. PM Liz Truss Defends Tax-Cutting Agenda To Party Conference](#)

This story is a perfect example of the myth of one person’s leadership being the way good leadership works. In these difficult times for our world, we are tempted to look for one person to come and lead our world out of its despair, but in reality such leadership always fails because the whole premise is wrong and misses the point of leadership.

There are so many traps around leadership which make it hard for us to know how to lead. Here are some of the behaviors which Berne Brown identifies in her research about leadership:

1. We avoid tough conversations, including giving honest productive feedback.
2. Rather than spending a reasonable amount of time proactively acknowledging and addressing the fears and feelings that show up during change and upheaval, we spend an unreasonable amount of time managing problematic behaviors.
3. Diminishing trust caused by a lack of connection and empathy.
4. Not enough people are taking smart risks or creating and sharing bold ideas to meet changing demands and the insatiable need for innovation. People are afraid of being put down or ridiculed.
5. We get stuck defined by setbacks, disappointments, and failures.
6. Too much shame and blame, not enough accountability and learning.
7. People are opting out of vital conversations about diversity and inclusivity.
8. When something goes wrong, individuals and teams are rushing into ineffective or unsustainable solutions rather than staying with the problem identification and solving. We end up fixing the wrong thing.
9. Organizational values are gauzy and assessed in terms of aspirations rather than actual behaviors that can be taught, measured, and evaluated.
10. Perfectionism and fear are keeping people from learning and growing.

Leadership is often seen as something one person is born with while others are not! These negative behaviors and beliefs often end up depriving us of the flow of the currency of gracious leadership. In contrast, Jesus saw that leadership was possible for all of his disciples. In fact, he believed that they could do greater things than he did among them

according to John 14:12 “Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.” Jesus mentored his disciples to show them his way of leadership and of getting to the heart of our human problems. He fully expected them to step up and become leaders after he left them. It didn’t matter to him that they were mostly simple folk who had simple jobs and came from humble origins. He knew that each human being has the potential to lead others because each human being has the potential to serve others.

Leadership for Jesus was about the ability to focus on God’s love, to reach out in that love, and to work with others to embrace that love. Jesus’ mission was that of healing the world by helping others to see all of life through the lens of God’s eternal love. The challenge for the disciples was to follow in his footsteps on the path of love through humble service.

Just prior to these words he washed their feet showing them how leadership was about being willing to love and to serve. Here is what he said to them after washing their feet after their last dinner together according to John 13:13-17, “¹³You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. ¹⁴So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. ¹⁵For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. ¹⁶Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. ¹⁷If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.”

Jesus knew that the challenge ahead of them was great. He knew that the temptations of the world to seek power, security, and esteem would be so difficult, but he also knew that once one experienced deep love, their potential would be activated. Even when the disciples stumbled, their inner compass was strongly connected to love that it guided them back to the way of Jesus.

If we are to develop the currency of gracious leadership today, we are invited to see how God has gifted us to love the world. What is your specific story and way of loving and serving the world? Who has mentored you to discover your gifts? Who are you mentoring right now? How might we increase the flow of this currency in our church and in our community?

Love in the way of Jesus is not weak. It is, I believe, the strongest force in the universe. Yet, it is always humble and willing to grow, share, and learn. Gracious leadership in the way of Jesus is all about our relationships and conversations. There is no illusion that one of us could have all the answers and that all we have to do is just follow that person. We are in this work of gracious leadership together and each of us has something to offer to the whole and yet each of us needs the whole in order to fulfill their calling.

In her book, *Dare to Lead*, Berne Brown tells this story about Colonel Halfhill who shares how she learned of an epidemic of loneliness in the Air Force and did something about it. This epidemic of disconnection appeared to be contributing to low morale and even hopelessness among Air Force personnel. The Colonel notes that this sense of

hopelessness is so severe... that the military in general and the Air Force in particular is struggling with increasing levels of suicide.

As part of her thinking about how to lead in the midst of this problem, Colonel Halfhill decided to do some research. She started by reading the most current Air Force leadership manual, written in 2011. The introduction told her this: “*Our Air Force’s current core values are an evolution of seven leadership traits identified in the Air Force’s very first manual on leadership...which was written in 1948.*” **One of those seven leadership traits was “humanness.”**

And she thought, “huh?” What is humanness?

So she digs up an old copy of this manual and begins reading about this 1948 Air Force value of humanness. **She was struck by how much emotion she felt emanating from the pages she read.** She was reading words like, “to belong, a sense of belonging, feeling, fear, compassion, confidence, kindness, friendliness, and mercy.” She writes, “*I was amazed....Here’s this military document that’s talking about leadership with mercy, and kindness, and belonging, and love.* **Yes, the word love was in a military leadership manual.**”

So Colonel Halfhill started counting, and she found that these feeling words are used 147 times in the manual. **147 references to things like belonging,** and the fear of combat, the fear of exclusion, and even love as an antidote – what it means as a leader to LOVE your people...there were 147 references to these things. “This document used a language that speaks to the human experience when it was instructing leaders on how to lead people. I went to our current manual on leadership and searched for the same words. Unfortunately, such words weren’t used...In sanitizing our language, I think we’ve decreased our comfort with expressing those feelings and holding that same space for others.” She knew that the culture around her was not ready for talking about deeper things as part of leadership and so she decided to focus on her six squadron commanders. “I felt that if I did nothing more than help these six people become leaders with different tools to navigate the challenges of leadership, then I would have done enough. With these six leaders, we have dug in –and because of that, there have been a million moments where Berne’s work has changed the way we are leading people.”

Here is the video segment: <https://youtu.be/sCH0kmux06s>

We will end with a poem blessing to all leaders from John O’Donohue:

May you have the grace and wisdom to act kindly, learning to distinguish between what is personal and what is not.

May you be hospitable to criticism.

May you never put yourself at the center of things.

May you act not from arrogance but out of service.

May you work on yourself, building up and refining the ways of your mind.

May those who work for you know you see and respect them.

May you learn to cultivate the art of presence in order to engage with those who meet you.

When someone fails or disappoints you, may the graciousness with which you engage be their stairway to renewal and refinement.

May you treasure the gifts of the mind through reading and creative thinking so that you continue as a servant of the frontier

Where the new will draw its enrichment from the old, and you never become a functionary.

May you know the wisdom of deep listening, the healing of wholesome words, the encouragement of the appreciative gaze, the decorum of held dignity, the springtime edge of the bleak question.

May you have a mind that loves frontiers so that you can evoke the bright fields that lie beyond the view of the regular eye.

May you have good friends to mirror your blind spots.

May leadership be for you a true adventure of growth. Amen.