

A Servant Community : Our Character

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It has been said that humility may be sought but never celebrated. The same thing may be said about those godly inner character traits that are to mark any servant of the Lord Jesus Christ and the community she or he represents. Indeed, who of us can celebrate the fact that we have never imposed our own way of doing things within our community? Or, have any of us perfected the art of being absolutely compassionate to all? Can we say of ourselves that we have never entertained the thought of giving up on the ministry all together? Yes, while humility, a non-imposing manner of ministry, compassion for all and a persevering spirit are inner qualities that must mark the community of God, these qualities may never be quite perfectly attained in this life. Nevertheless, these inner traits are essential to authenticate our mission in the world. This union of inner character and mission, that the Gospel demands from all of us, is expressed most beautifully in the first of the Servant songs within Isaiah.

By way of review, you may recall that within Isaiah there are four songs of the Servant. Now, the image of the Servant in the first of these songs is used in Isaiah to paint a picture of what ideal Israel was to look like. They, like us, failed miserably at living up to the expectations of the Servant but the shoes remain to be filled (H. Williamson). Of course, the shoes were perfectly filled by the Lord Jesus Christ, God's perfect Israel and Servant and the fullest expression of the Servant of God. Yet, the New Testament makes it quite clear that Servant ministry of Jesus has been transferred to the Church and as such, parts of the Servant songs still provide a vision for what the Church is called to be.

Now, out of the many things that could be said about the Servant in Isaiah, I would like to draw your attention to how the first poem weds the inner character of the Servant to his mission. Jonathan spoke to us yesterday about being the people of God for the nations. That is who we are. This Servant poem emphasizes the important inner characteristics required of the people of God if we are to have a mission to

the nations. It provides for us a picture of what a servant community should look like, perfectly illustrated in Jesus Christ, God's perfect Israel. Isa 42,1-4 reads:

Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his law.

Notice how it is precisely this humble and compassionate servant the nations wait for. They have had their fill of those who would proudly impose their religion through arrogance and abusive means. The Servant is gentle and compassionate and it is this inner-quality that makes the Servant so missiologically effective. The nations wait for such an agent of God's mission.

Prior to looking more closely at the inner-character of the Servant, that should be internalized in all Christian leaders and clergy, I should like to address two questions: (1) Why is the inner-character of the servant-leader important and (2) How is the inner-character of the servant-leader cultivated? First: *Why is the inner-character of the servant leader important?* That is, why wed the mission of the church to the inner-character of her ministers? Primarily, because the servant represents God to the nations. As one scholar notes (Conrad), the Servant in Isaiah functions as an *icon* of God. Upon reading passages surrounding the Servant poem, we note a concerted effort to contrast the God of Israel to the gods of Babylon. The gods of Babylon are incapable of transmitting their glory to their representative idols on earth (41.22-26-29) but the God of Israel "glorifies himself" in his servant Israel (Is 49.3). While the icons of the Babylonian gods can neither speak nor, much less, predict the future, the God of Israel manifests

his speech, justice, will and praise through his image on earth – his Servant. That is, the Servant is the very icon of God while the idols of Babylon can transmit nothing of their deities because the gods they represent are less than nothing.

Thus, the Servant's character provides a picture, an icon as it were, of God for the nations and, to the extent that we cultivate these qualities and follow Christ (who is the fullest expression of the Servant of God) we will also be an icon of God for people from every nation. Our striving after a godly inner-character, then, is important because the Church, however poorly she images God, is none-the-less a picture of the Lord Jesus on display for all nations. This high and heavy iconic calling then drives us to a second question: *How is this ever important inner-character needed to represent God to the nations cultivated?* The text answers this question in both explicit and implicit ways. Let's look first at what is explicitly stated in the text. The passage explicitly states that the inner character needed to represent God to the nations is clearly, and refreshingly, a work of the Spirit of God who is upon the Servant (42.1; 61.1). "My Spirit is upon him." While in the first part of Isaiah the Spirit gave leaders a sense of ethical and moral qualities such as doing justice for the poor, in 42.1 and on through the rest of the book, the Spirit is transforming the inner qualities of the Servant that authenticate the Servant's mission (Ma). We see the resilience and unflinching character of the servant begin to take shape from this point on. There is emphasis on the ability to be compassionate and to persevere in ministry in spite of the sufferings to come. Thus, while the Servant and we who are servant-leaders are a painting of God for the nations, it is the Spirit of God who is the One painting the canvas. His Spirit is the agent in our inner transformation and it is the Spirit who authenticates our ministry. So, the text explicitly states that it is the Spirit of God who is cultivating the inner character needed for mission. How then does the text implicitly state that the inner character of the Servant is cultivated for mission? What can we assume is to occur in the life of Servant prior to engaging in mission? God's Spirit is upon the Servant but how is this work made evident?

The passage implicitly demonstrates that the Servant will have to have experienced a gracious work of God in his own life prior to being God's agent in mission. Jonathan spoke yesterday that, when it comes to mission, grace comes first. And grace must come to the Servant before he is to be involved in mission.

Note that the Servant is commissioned to implement justice in the nations in Isaiah 42 but in Isaiah 40,27 Israel complains that she has not experienced God's justice. The Servant is to give sight to the blind (Isa 42,6-7) but they themselves are blind (Isa 42,18). They are to liberate the captives, but they are trapped in holes. In other words, the Spirit has quite a big job to do! The Servant is pictured as doing all those things that he has not yet experienced. They are called to bring something to the nations they do not have. They are commissioned to do something for the nations they are incapable of doing. It has been noted, however, (M. Sweeney) that the fact that Isaiah 42 pictures the Servant as implementing universal justice, giving sight to the blind, bringing back the captives and proclaiming God's acts implies that they have now experienced these things. We can assume that God has done a work in the Servant's life because of her mission activity. Grace has come first! *El zapatero ya tiene zapatos*. Thus, the inner transformation needed for mission is a work of the Spirit that implies a complete rearrangement of life in the one commissioned.

The ideal Servant is also pictured as teaching the nations the Torah. How does this come about? From the looks of things, the "blind" and "deaf" Servant of God is not really interested in what the Torah has to offer. But, it may be deduced that since the Servant is teaching the Torah, something has occurred. In fact, the "deaf" Servant will become a Student-Servant. In Isa 50,4-10, we find that the Servant wakes up every morning to learn the words of Yahweh. The Servant has experienced a change with regard to the Scripture. He now internalizes the words of God. The Servant does this so he can comfort the weary and sustain the weak. The nations wait for such a Student-Servant who, in being renewed by the Word, can renew the vulnerable. Yet, as Christians, this demand to internalize the Scriptures must not be seen about from the person of Christ. We will be able to sustain the weary with the Scriptures in proportion to our interpreting Scriptures as a witness to Christ

You might recall that the first poem reads, "in his Torah" the nations wait. Interestingly enough, Matthew uses another version of this Servant song that reads and "in his Name" the nations wait (Matt 12). We know that Matthew knew of the version that read, "in his law", so why would he opt for the version reading "in his Name". Because, as Carson notes, the Torah or Law in Matthew serves to point people perfectly and compassionate to Christ Jesus. We sustain the weary by approaching all of Scrip-

ture, yes even the dreaded book of Leviticus, as a witness to Christ.

We see then, that the inner character required for mission is both a work of the Spirit. The Spirit has wrought about changes in the life of the Servant. The blind see, the deaf now hear the words of God and those who have had no justice are liberated. The Spirit has changed the harsh realities the Servant experiences. Moreover, the Spirit propels the Servant to be a student of Scripture. These are the broad strokes of the Spirit's paintbrush that begin to transform the inner character of the Servant. But there is more to the painting!

What will the transformed inner character look like? I would like to direct your attention to four inner traits that should mark every servant community that proclaims the Lord Jesus Christ: (1) A non-imposing manner of ministry; (2) compassion for the most vulnerable; (3) being incarnational and, (4) perseverance in mission. These are traits that represent the Lord Jesus to those within our pews and are traits that people from every nation long to see in an authentic community of Christ. The text reads, "in the [mission and law of the Servant] the nations wait." Yet, as we will see, it will not be possible to have a community with these traits if we do not first prioritize them in our individual lives. Let us then turn our attention to how the Servant poem expresses the Spirit generated inner character of the community of Christ that people from every nation long to see.

1. People from every nation are longing for a community marked by a non-imposing manner of doing God's work.

While in ancient times, when peoples were conquered, the conqueror parading in the streets would enforce the new religion upon those he had recently conquered (Young). The Servant, in counter-cultural fashion will have nothing to do with imposed religion: He "will not cry aloud or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street." The image of a quiet servant is taken up in the fourth Servant poem when referring to the lamb silent before its shearers. It is a picture of a Servant of God who doesn't quarrel and raise havoc in the streets. In the Gospel of Matthew, this inner quality of quietness, in part, lies behind texts that relate to us the manner in which our Lord ministered. In this way, Jesus associates his own ministry with that of the Servant. His ministry is markedly quiet when compared to that of his opponents. The Pharisees tend to impose their views by making quite a lot of noise in public, scorning Jesus for healing the lame or quarreling with disciples for eating grain. Jesus, on the other hand, withdraws and

brings healing to the poor with a tranquil and gentle sacred rhythm (Matt 12) (Beaton). His disciples are to internalize this same non-imposing and gentle quality of their Servant-King.

Now, in saying that we are to serve in a non-imposing manner I do not mean that we are to relegate our convictions to the margins, out of fear that we might come across as "imposing" in a society that values the acceptance of all positions. The Servant, after all, has something to say that is of little value to the majority. What does he have to say? – "the Torah", he also has something that must be done – "justice." Without something to say that is from *above*, or something of heaven to do on earth, the Church will only be a mere echo of society! Not only will she bore people to death but she will fail in her task. The Church must be the echo of God's speech and proclaim, in tangible ways, acts to the world. Thus, to be "non-imposing" does not mean to do away with all convictions.

Rather, to cultivate a "non-imposing" manner of ministry is to resist self-promotion. It is to capture God's manner for kingdom building and for engaging in ecclesiastical business. No doubt, we can all provide sufficient examples of ministries built on self-promotion. The question is, however, do our lives and ministries exemplify self-promotion or the promotion of the kingdom in a non-imposing manner? Sheep, after all, are led they are not to be driven. People from every nation are longing for leaders who have convictions yet know how to mediate their convictions to others in non-imposing ways. This is an inner-quality produced in us when we respond to the Spirit of God.

2. People every nation are longing for a community that is marked by compassion for the most vulnerable

Of the Servant-leader it is said: "a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench". A bruised reed and a faintly burning wick indicate to whom the non-imposing and gentle ministry of the Servant is directed. As Goldingay notes, these are images of the most vulnerable of society. We are to imagine people who are alive, but afflicted and oppressed. Like a reed that is not actually snapped off but bent and bruised or a candle that is not actually out, but is very low. The images paint a picture of those who should be in our pastoral horizon. Broken people, not just from the English speaking world, but broken humanity from all the nations have come to our churches for care. Have we identified them personally or are they distant statistics? Do we see them when we gaze out upon our pastoral

horizon? The challenge, at least in my experience, is that the opportunities to help the most vulnerable of society seem to present themselves at the most inopportune times. But in bringing these opportunities of ministry to the vulnerable across our paths, could it be that God is reminding us that He cares more about people than programmes? Did not our Lord say, "For as much as you did it to the least of these, you did it unto me."? People from every nation are longing for a community that shows compassion to the most vulnerable. Compassion, too, is an inner trait that the Spirit wants to paint in us.

3. **People from every nation are longing for a community that practices incarnational ministry.**

In a beautifully woven arrangement of Hebrew words, the poem presents the Servant as having the same nature as those within his pastoral horizon. The vulnerable are described as a:

Reed about to break
// **Wick** that is faintly burning

The *Servant* is also referred to as a reed and as a wick, but differently. In the Hebrew, the Servant is presented as a:

Wick not faintly burning
// **Reed** not about to break (or a reed that is not 'discouraged', ESV)

Both the Servant and those he ministers to are made of the "same stuff." Both are described as reeds and wicks. They are of the same substance (Motyer). In the same way that the suffering Servant in the fourth poem is a Lamb slaughtered for the Sheep who have gone astray. The Servant shares in the humanity of those he serves. The difference is not one of humanity but of sustenance (as J. Koole notes). Both the wick of the Servant and of the vulnerable are subject to the same winds, but the Servant has a continual supply of oil because the Spirit of God upon him. Both the Servant and the vulnerable are reeds that receive blows and bruises, neither is immune from suffering but the Servant is not immobilized by the bruises as are the vulnerable (Koole).

Rather, the inner qualities generated by the Spirit enable the Servant to face the pressures that lie ahead. He will be dealt heavy blows but, through it all, will prove to be unflinching and resilient. As someone who suffers in life, the Servant is in a unique position to share what sustains him with the vulnerable. He shares the life of God with those who are just like him. Their wicks can also burn from a continual supply of oil. They too can receive the in-

ner-qualities that enable one to face suffering head on because they can share in the same Spirit.

Now it is easy to digest the fact that ministry is sharing the source of our sustenance with those who need sustenance. We like to be on the giving end of things, being known as people who stoop down to sustain the weak, and rightly so. How wonderful it is to hear words like, "Your words so comforted me and gave me hope for the things I had to endure that week." However, reaching down to provide sustenance for one in need is not all that incarnational ministry entails. Incarnational ministry also calls us to come to grips with our own humanity. We must admit that pride will always want to journey with us in pastoral ministry. There will always exist that ugly temptation among leaders, including clergy, to live *only* as "the woman or the man of God" and forget that we are to also be "the woman of women and the man of men." I can remember more than once (twice to be exact) being pulled over for speeding by the police and hinting to the officer that my traffic violation should be considered in light of the fact that *I was a pastor*. By the way, the officer was quick to remind me that of all people, I should not be speeding. You see, the fact that we share in the same humanity of those within our pastoral horizon should challenge our thinking regarding the human equality between clergy and laity.

Having grown up in Latin America and served in pastoral ministry among Hispanic immigrants in the Chicago area, I have come to appreciate the insights of thinkers such as Mexican liberation theologian and philosopher Enrique Dussel. Particularly, I appreciate Dussel's reflection on the "humanity" of clergy that seems so pertinent even today. He writes:

"To be a part of a social class is to enjoy the fruits of its culture and the benefits of its power ... when a clergyman has to go to a municipal office for some reason, he is often invited to leave the long line of people waiting for service and to come right to the front. He readily avails himself to the offer, pretending that it is a mark of respect for the Church or God's ministers. In reality, he is enjoying the privileges of a class that has social power. Such power, insofar as it exerts domination over others, is sin. Clergymen make full use of the political power shared by their class when they jump in line or use their muscle in administrative dealings." (Or, we might add, try to get out of paying traffic fines the rest of world needs to pay).

Now, the line between "leverage" and "getting things done, especially in the more bureaucratically

oriented countries," is not entirely clear in my mind, perhaps because I do not want it to be clear. But, I do think that the kind of thinking Dussel engages in should be taken seriously by the church today. It is quite easy, given the nature of our task, to forget our roots. We are quick to forget that we (as Israel was) have been chosen because we really are nothing (1 Cor 1). Our only real motive for boasting is the scandalous Cross of Christ. Thus, we must be in tune with our own humanity, vulnerability and equality with those whom we serve. We suffer the same blows of life, cry about the same things and are subject to the same illnesses. Yet, it is precisely this that lends credibility to our message! Sustained by God we may be, but we are still merely *wicks* and *reeds* like those within our pastoral care. A candle that is barely burning will not find much encouragement gazing at light bulb and its electrical power socket, they have nothing in common. But, a faintly burning candle will be attracted to a candle that does not burn low. Yes, we are men and women of God, sustained by him but let us remember to pray, "Lord, make me human." In so doing, we continue to be the icon of God who himself was made man. It is this sort of incarnational ministry that people from every nation long to see. While our cultures are vastly different from many of those whom we serve, we share a common humanity that should be expressed humbly in our communities. We can show them the source that sustains our human frailty. The work of the Spirit then transforms the inner character of the Servant into a non-imposing agent of God, filled with compassion and fully in tune with humanity. Let's look then at the final inner trait that authenticates a Servant community – perseverance, that most difficult task.

A young man wrote to his mother saying: "Dear mother, I am no longer attending church for two reasons. The first reason is that everybody there hates me. The second reason is that I hate everybody." Love, your son. Quickly, the mother wrote her son the following: "My dear son, I'm going to give you two reasons for you to begin attending church again. The first reason is that you are 40 years old and its time you behaved like a man. The second reason is that you are the parish priest." Love, your mother. Have we not all had the desire to give up on the ministry? Yes, we are all in need to persevere and perseverance is what people long to see in us..

4. **People from every nation are longing for a community that perseveres in the mission of the Lord Jesus Christ.**

The last inner-characteristic of the Servant is that the Servant perseveres in mission. The song reads, "till he has established justice in the earth and in his law the nations wait" Yes, people from every nation await with eager expectation the justice and law mediated by the Servant. Yet, who is up for such a task? Where does one get the energy to go about and do these sorts of things? The poem indicates quite clearly that the Servant, sustained by God himself, will be able to persevere because God sustains him in ministry (50.4-10). God can sustain the Servant because he himself does not grow weary and he shares his life with the humble. We see again our *iconic* role as the people of God, the life we have pictures God's life. How long does the sustenance last? The text makes it clear that as long as there is a need for justice and Torah, the Servant can count on God's sustenance for the task (W. Beuken).

The Spirit of God equips the Servant-leader and sustains him throughout the task. Perseverance, then, is not just waiting for our years in ministry to come to an end so that we might receive our due reward and then collapse. Rather, it is wisely drawing on the Spirit given sustenance in order to persevere in mission.

We began by noting the importance of inner character for mission. Why is it important? Because the Church of Jesus Christ *is* the icon of God, we transmit his image to the nations. When people see us, they should see Christ, so we should reflect who he is authentically. We also noted that the Spirit of God is the one transforming our inner character. He rearranges our lives so that we might experience his grace prior to commissioning us. He shapes in us a character that reflects the Servant-King, the Lord Jesus Christ. And it is this Servant-King who taught us incarnational ministry and calls us to do the same. He came from heaven and entered our world, veiled his glory. He poured compassion on the most vulnerable. He persevered in mission suffering the cruel death on a cross because of the joy set before him. Now, he stands risen and beckons us to this same Servant ministry so that the elect from every nation may come to taste what they long for. Let us sing then, G. Kendrick's "From Heaven You Came" as a response to the Servant's beckoning of us to his ministry.