

Empowering Servant Leadership: Ten Years On

Preface:

Welcome to the end, People of God!

Really. Today is the last time we will ever talk about our Core Values as a church! I'm joking...but it is the last day of this series that we've had, where we've been reviewing the things we hold as a congregation as non-negotiable, as guiding principles, in our attempts to live out our mission as a Smoky Row.

I won't ask us to list them. I can do that:

***Prophetic Multiculturalism,
Kingdom Building Stewardship,
Intentional Christian Hospitality,
Contextual Brethren Life,
Needs-oriented Outreach,
Dynamic Corporate Worship,
Biblical Spiritual Formation,
and today: Empowering Servant Leadership.***

Now: God will resurrect us even if we don't have these memorized.

But what I hope is that we are more likely, for awhile, to connect what we do and who we are as a congregation to these things that we've talked about. I hope that as we think about what it means to be us, that we remember these core values that we hold.

It is my real prayer that when we talk about anything: our church life, the ministries we should be doing or are doing, what it means for us to divert our resources to this thing or that thing, who and why we partner with others, everything: that our core values are immediately and explicitly something we turn to in these conversations that I promise we will have.

Introduction:

But today, we're talking about Empowering Servant Leadership. We'll walk through our core value together, remember some Biblical paradigms that guide us in this, provide some corrective examples of what leadership is, I hope.

But first, we should pray.

Prayer:

So: Let's read through our Core Value together, all in it's six-paragraph glory. One go, here:

Core Value Read Through:

A. We value leadership, understanding it as the ability of a person or group to influence others toward the accomplishment of some goal. Because of this, we promote informal and formal leadership development opportunities, and we thank God for those who lead among us (1 Thess 5:11,12).

B. However, leadership in Smoky Row is markedly different from society's view of leadership. Leaders in society often claim power and use power for self-serving ends. At Smoky Row we reject the belief that leaders should cling to power. Instead, we say with Jesus that "whoever wants to be first must be last" and "whoever wants to be great must be the slave of all" (Matt 20:25-28). Rather than protect their own power, SRBC leaders seek to have their leadership tested and critiqued within the context of safe, loving relationships that honor the work God has done through them on behalf of the church.

Jesus, whom we seek to follow, took up voluntary slavery on behalf of others. Leaders at Smoky Row do the same. They do not seek to build their own kingdoms, or bring glory to themselves, but like Jesus, build God's Kingdom and bring glory to God. Leaders at SRBC consider themselves to be servants of both God and the people around them. They act as

advocates for others by meeting their needs, ensuring their well-being, and doing what they can to bless and build their lives. This approach to leadership is highly relational.

C. SRBC leaders also consider servant leadership to be explicitly empowering. This is true in two senses. In the first sense, servant leaders are themselves empowered by SRBC through training, encouragement, and fellowship with other leaders. Our leaders are encouraged to act in faith and to pursue God's call in their lives. We do what we can to help people "fan into flame" the gifts God has given them to build God's Kingdom (2 Tim 1:6).

More importantly, servant leaders are empowered by God. We believe that God has equipped those who make up the body of Christ with particular gifts. At Smoky Row, we are committed to positioning people to work from their gifts, because we believe that it takes the entire church, working with the gifts that God has given each member, to achieve the full intentions of God. No one individual can carry out the work God has for his people (Ex 18:13- 27; 1 Cor 12; Eph 2:8-10; 4:11-16).

Because of this belief, our SRBC servant leaders work hard to empower others. This second sense of empowering emphasizes how Smoky Row's servant leaders position others (both formally and informally)

to discover God’s calling and gifting. This sort of leadership models itself on John the Baptist, who declared that “[Jesus] must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:25-30). It recalls that Jesus did not leave his followers without help, but prepared them with his teaching and promised the Holy Spirit to carry on his work (John 14).

Empowering servant leadership works to replicate the leader’s skills, techniques, and insights in the life of another. We don’t believe that all people should lead the same way—this negates the uniqueness with which God has made each of us—but we do believe that certain skills, techniques, and insights can be learned and used for the growth of the kingdom of God. Smoky Row leaders are called to multiply their leadership by empowering other leaders.

On What the World Needs:

In your mind, imagine some stereotype of a great leader. Take a second.

Now: I’m willing to bet that what we imagine right now is at least a little more “holy,” than they might be on some random Thursday morning. And God bless us for that, that’s what worship does, what gathering together does: it shifts us from our typical way of appraising the world into a more Christ-like one.

But often, when we think of leaders, we think of shiny, sparkling ones. Clean and trimmed, they are in our image: white or brown or yellow or red. We think of someone strong, self-possessed, and at least isolated, if not untouchable. Someone maybe knowing secrets, who has power--capability to get done what needs to get done. And we have opinions on what needs to get done, of course, because no leader is without a context in which he or she leads. We think of a sort of hero. And if we are insecure with ourselves, or have not been celebrated well for who God has made us, we think of someone unlike us. And if we are overly comfortable with ourselves, or desperate to prove ourselves, we think of ourselves, or at least someone like us. Politics and business both shape our standard.

But, look: The world doesn't need anymore heroes, any more celebrities, any more Messiahs--it's had one. We live under the shadow of Christ, and we'll always live there: It is our place, a place of safety and a place of incredible power. Out in the spotlight, where the newsworthy happens, things wilt; they get scorched, and fail. Integrity fades. Its light isolates and defines; but it doesn't change the world, or multiply what it shines on. It creates followers and worshippers, but it doesn't create little, disciple-making "Christs."

What the world needs instead is Jesus, and anyone willing to live a little like him. Remember him?

***“He was despised and rejected by men,
a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering.
Like one from whom men hide their faces
he was despised, and we esteemed him not.***

***Surely he took up our infirmities
and carried our sorrows,
yet we considered him stricken by God,
smitten by him, and afflicted.***

***But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was upon
him,
and by his wounds we are healed”***

That’s not usually what we think of when we think “great leader.” Or this:

***“being in very nature God, [Jesus] did not consider
equality with God something to be used to his own
advantage;***

rather, he made himself nothing

**by taking the very nature [b] of a servant,
being made in human likeness.**

**And being found in appearance as a human being,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!”**

And if we don't want to live by Jesus' example, we can live in light of what he's told us. Remember that great moment in the lives of his disciples?

“A dispute also arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest. Jesus said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves. You are those who have stood by me in my trials. And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”

The world needs indentured servants, who willingly trade their lives for the salvation that they'll be given on the other side of their service. Ones who offer their their influence, and its sphere, to be used for their master's purposes.

Or, better: The world needs children who desperately want to see their family be a blessing, and are hungry for more siblings to share their space with. Children who teach their younger siblings, by example and lesson, how to live well in this family. Children who know they are loved, who are not spoiled, who are allowed to play and discover what they are good at.

Is our leadership, the way we exercise our influence and why we exercise it, modeled after the Lord? Or is it modeled after something else? If the answer is something else, then we're maybe a little bit failing.

On Competency, Core Identity & the Church's Gifts:

And you know, it is rare for adults to think that they have anything to learn or want to learn. And if you find yourself resisting the idea that you could be wrong or be taught, then realize that pride is crouching at your door, and will soon wrestle you. The only way to win, is to turn away from the fight and embrace humility.

We are pragmatists in America, and are almost only rewarded for competencies, for being good at something. But competency is like manna: If we try to hoard it, it will turn maggoty when the morning of our neediness dawns. The greatest Christian virtue is not competency, it is dependence. And we will find that at the end of the day, that is what Jesus will reward us for, not for how precisely we have executed this or that particular set of actions toward some goal.

We will be rewarded for allowing God's loving perspective of us to be the greatest one we cling to, for living our lives in light of it, and for gratefulness that leads to any action, even the feeblest one.

And an emphasis on competency is problematic because of a big basic truth of humanity which is that no one is good at everything. No one is. If they seem like it, sooner or later they will self-destruct from whatever thing is driving them to seem perfect. Those who present to the world omnicompetence aren't to be admired, they're suspect.

And sin isn't revealed in the fact that people cannot do it all but were supposed to; sin is revealed in the fact deep in our hearts, we forget that we were created out of God's community, the eternal community of the Father, Son & Spirit, for community--the community of other people. We

were created to need other people. Limitations are part of the design. And the Church should be the place where we bear witness to this fact: Without other people, we are incompetent, but that together, as we join with the various gifts God has given us, we really can do whatever is asked of us.

So when Paul says:

“It was [The Lord] who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.”

When he says this, much of what he's saying that you on your own will never be as effective as you with your congregation, no matter what you think, no matter the hassles that community gives rise to, no matter how much more efficient or speedy you know you could be. You will not be able to grow into maturity, you will not hear the voice of truth that keeps us on the path of growth into Christ. We need each one of us, each part, for this to happen. This is why God has given us the church, and without it, a Christian is simply incomplete.

But community is not only the thing we need to be fully competent and complete; it's also the context in which we discover our gifts. Does this make sense? It is the place where we discover who God has made us to be. This happens in all sorts of ways, but especially as we nurture in one another the gifts that we see in each other, as we teach one another the things that we have learned--as we grow together--we become more and more aware of just how God has shaped us to fit into this body.

Self-sufficient competency is a dangerous trap. The gospel is not pragmatic; if it were, God wouldn't have gone to all the trouble that He went to. There would have been a finger-snap and bam, salvation. We get in trouble when we forget that humility and service are the greatest things. No church's health or wealth or work depends on just one of us;

it demands all of us.

People of Influence:

We have to come to the place where we realize that every single one of us is a person of influence. Each of us is a person of influence. When we don't realize this, all sorts of dysfunctional things happen, right? We misuse or abuse our influence, because we think that because we don't have a title, we can just do whatever we want or we're not that important or no one will notice our divisive or unhelpful efforts. We don't realize that by abdicating our role in keeping this body healthy, we position it for sickness, rather than health.

And you know: Titles are things you have to pay for, for the stuff you own: houses & cars. Not all of us have roles with titles in the life of our congregation. What we should be interested in is the crowns that God will give us, is making for us right now, created from the efforts we have made to wisely use the influence in the church that he has blessed us with. And they are ones that we'll lay back down before him. He won't make a profit on the things when we return them to him; they cost the blood of Christ, really.

Call & Response:

If it's true that leadership is, simply, the ability to influence another person, then: Who are you influencing? Your

spouse? Your children? Your life group? Your co-workers? Your neighbors? Who? Does your influence take the shape of money? Advice? Encouragement? Punishment or Shame?

If we believe that Christian leadership demands servant-like behavior, the question is simple: Around those you influence, do you serve them or lord yourself over them? Are you secure enough with your strengths and your identity--are you safe in the Lord?--so that you can be frank without being demanding? Be honest without being manipulative?

And is your Christian Leadership empowering or disempowering? The most heavily weighted perspective on this is not yours; it's those who directly are influenced by you. What do they say? Are you helping others in areas they need helped? Are you passing on the "skills, techniques, & insights" that you have? Or are you hoarding them? Because they will spoil & feed no one if we do.

Small:

Now, we are a small community, distanced through the cautious pandemic posture we have taken. And that can give us a sense that we deserve a "bi," deserve to sort of skip past the deep sense of replication at the heart of this Core Value. There are aspects of this Core Value that aren't simply hard for us to realize now, but have been hard for us to realize since it was written. We've never been able to be

a community of people like John the Baptist, always becoming less so that others can become more, always helping raise up leaders to take over from us and act out of who God has made them to be. That's not because we're selfish with leadership; it's because we don't have the masses of people that it takes. But--and this is really something that I think we must acknowledge and embrace, really--God has given us each other on purpose, not on accident. God has given us who we need to do what God has asked our congregation to do. And there are even, perhaps, one or two of us who God might be personally asking things of, too--work that we have yet to consider. We have what we need, and we will have what we need. What we need most is for all of us to understand that it takes all of us.

Conclusion:

I hope that we can live out Empowering Servant Leadership, that we can cling to this core value, multiplying into one another our own skills and insights, helping one another to realize and practice the gifts that God has blessed us with, and act as Christ-like servants as we do all of this.

But these many things we have discussed:

***Empowering Servant Leadership,
Biblical Spiritual Formation,
Dynamic Corporate Worship,***

***Needs-oriented Outreach,
Contextual Brethren Life,
Intentional Christian Hospitality,
Kingdom Building Stewardship, and
Prophetic Multiculturalism,***

They are just mouthfuls of words if we forget that God has made us, Smoky Row. God has shaped us, over time--over trials and successes, through losses and fears and glories, and we are doing great work for the Kingdom of God, we really are joining together to pursue God's love, become more like Jesus, and build God's Kingdom through word & deed. We really are becoming more like Jesus all the time.

I don't want us to forget these Core Values, because I don't want us to forget ourselves. I want us to continually be waking up to ourselves and remembering that we are here, empowered and nurtured by the love of God, and we can do anything if we care enough to faithfully remember him and live like him for the littlest while.

I want us to live in power, live in peace, live and log-off in the presence of the God who will not fail us if we turn to God with our hearts wide open, and beg God to make us, this church, more perfectly like Jesus, our Lord. Don't forget our core values; they are who we are. Which of them spark fire in your heart? Which of them intrigue you? Which of them

frames for you some great principle you didn't even know you held?

Let's speak the truth in love. Let's join together, each part doing our work, growing into maturity and love. Hold to one another & the Lord, serve like him in whatever area of influence you have, and help others to learn from you, so they can do the same thing. If we could do that, and only that, we'd be doing more than the world could ever teach us, or could ever do.