

The children's story is the first half of today's sermon. When listening today, think 'cowboy' and think 'shepherd'!

Jews in the time of Jesus knew about tyrannical rulers and violent abuses of power. They had been conquered by the Babylonians, the Persians, and the Greeks, and now were living under the Romans who were one of the greatest oppressors of all time. What kept them going was their belief that Yahweh would send them a Messiah who would throw off Roman rule and establish a Jewish political kingdom on earth. This is what the disciples thought Jesus was going to do.

But Jesus' kingdom was not like this popular expectation. The kingdom he would establish was 'not of this world'. It was not a civil and physical organization. It was a spiritual kingdom, the kingdom of God on earth.

Jesus tries to explain this to the twelve disciples 3 times in Mark. He tells them he'll be rejected, suffer, die and then rise in 3 days, and that "to be the greatest, you have to be the servant of all". In today's reading, Jesus tells them this for the third time, and again, they don't 'get' it. When he finishes his explanation, they still believe he'll be sitting on a throne, ruling over a physical kingdom, and they ask to sit at places of honor beside him.

So Jesus explains that the real nature of leadership in the reign of God is the exact opposite of what the world values. That's why they aren't 'getting' it.

He tells them they are not to follow the way of hierarchical power, but rather the SERVANT leadership way of Jesus. It's top-down and bottom-up at the same time. Each one infuses the other.

Secular, hierarchical power is top-down. It rules by domination. Those in power rule by exercising excessive authority, relying on status, and looking down their noses at those lower on the totem pole, . They are tyrants.

"But it is not so in you," says Jesus. Hierarchical, top-down power is not for the followers of Jesus. Granted, it seems weird. It goes against our basic human survival instinct. Human evolution has favored the strong and the powerful. But Jesus says that true life comes from denying this evolutionary instinct. Whoever wants to be great must be a servant. This is bottom-up. Authority has its place, but only as long as it derives from serving others.

When people talk about leadership, they typically refer to the person in authority as the person on "top." Everyone else is said to be "under" his authority. Scripture even speaks this way. The psalmist (47:8) says "God reigns over the nations." Using these metaphors of "over" and "under" to describe leadership makes sense. To lead, you need a view of the whole landscape. You need to be in the referee's stand to see if the ball has bounced out of bounds.

But God is not only over us; he sets himself under us. He is our rock, giving us a sure place to stand (Ps 18:31) To be a good leader, you also have to lead from the bottom up. You are a *foundation* for the activity of others. You use the authority you've been given to help equip others to pursue their ministries.

This is where leading top-down and bottom-up come together. To be a foundation in the lives of those whom the Lord has given you, you have to set yourself *over* them. You have to set boundaries. Walk here, not there, you say. Trust these people, not those. You explain which paths lead to life, and which lead to death

We see top-down power combined with servanthood when we parent or teach our children. We have authority over them that includes power. But we love them with a servant love and *exercise our authority through this love*. Children are equals in our families or classrooms, ie they have equal worth as people. We ask for and listen to their thoughts and opinions. We value and respect them. We help them participate in the decision making process in many aspects of their lives. However, in our role as parents or educators, we're in authority over them. We're not wishy-washy or laissez-faire. We don't let them run the show. We don't give them everything they want. That's chaos. We use our authority in a loving way.

We also see servant leadership in the church. We're blessed to have many leaders in this church. We're also blessed to share many diverse theological perspectives. Granted, it would be easier to lead if we all had exactly the same beliefs about what God's church and kingdom ought to look like. But fitting everybody into the same mold isn't what the United Church is about.

Last time I spoke, I mentioned Gretta Vosper, a minister at West Hill United Church in Scarborough, Ontario, who proclaims to be an atheist. She doesn't believe Jesus existed at all. Yet she remains an ordained minister of the United Church. She has now been ordered to 'revisit the vows' she took 22 years ago. This review would determine her fitness to be a minister in the United Church, and could result in her being 'defrocked'. She's currently appealing that ruling.

At the 42nd General Council this past August, Rev Bruce Gregersen, the church's senior advisor on theology and faith, acknowledged that "there's an issue here that people want to be considered... The issue is likely the question of belief in

God...The issue is to ask whether we're in a stage where we need to reaffirm that in our life and processes. The implications are significant around that question."

Here's the problem. On the one hand, the United Church prides itself on tolerance for diversity and inclusiveness. It doesn't want to limit the scope of beliefs within the church. On the other hand, it asks the question: "Has Rev Vosper gone too far?" I don't have an answer.

But I started to wonder how the leadership model of Jesus could unfold in a setting where there are theological beliefs at opposite ends of the spectrum, like at West Hill United.

There 2/3 of the congregation left and found other places to worship. The other third stayed at West Hill. Differences in theological beliefs don't necessarily lead to people leaving a congregation, but sometimes they do. And that's OK. That's one of the reasons we have different denominations within the Christian church.

But I believe there's a way discussion should take place – that follows the servant leadership model of Jesus. And by the way, it's hard to do. Notice the cowboy hat I'm wearing. That's to remind me (and you) that I'm more cowboy than shepherd. But I'm working on it!

This is what I think the servant leadership model would look like. If my theological perspective is different from yours and if I am passionate about it and I want to share it with you, I could do it as a cowboy or a shepherd. I could lead in a hierarchical top down way or I could follow the servant leadership model of Jesus.

In the servant leadership model, I'd accentuate and hold up the best of your beliefs and values. I'd recognize and accept that your beliefs are different than mine but that your beliefs are RIGHT for you at this time and place in your life JUST AS mine are RIGHT for me at this time and place in my life. I'd be a foundation to support you as I helped you mature in YOUR theological perspective. I'd help equip and empower you to pursue YOUR ambitions, hopes and ministries. That's the bottom-up part of it.

Here's the top-down part. At the same time IN LOVE I'd express my beliefs without confronting or judging. I'd lead with conviction and passion, but would not IMPOSE my vision on others. There's no room within the servant leadership model of Jesus for me to create the impression that my theology is superior to yours or that I'm more advanced theologically than you are. There's no room to expect you to give up your beliefs and take on mine. My role would be to foster a process in which you could discern where God is calling you, either individually, or collectively as a church community. I might, in VERY RARE circumstances, feel I have to set boundaries. But I think that would only come if I believed you were on a path that "led to death", ie if your teachings were promoting evil – if they went against the core values that are found within the moral codes of the major religions.

In the United Church, we're likely going to be facing more and more diversity as we move into the 21st century. Ladysmith First United Church is a vital and vibrant community of faith. I'm thankful to be a part of it. I pray that we'll continue to explore and share our diverse theologies and beliefs in the spirit of Jesus. Let us be a community of shepherds, not cowboys. Amen

