

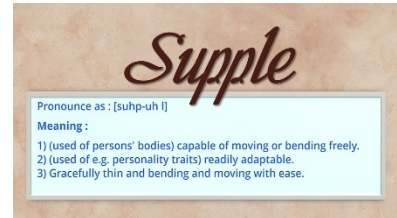
Prophets of a Future Not Our Own

Rev. Dr. Michal Piazza

Children's Sabbath, Sunday, October 21, 2018

Mark 10:35-45

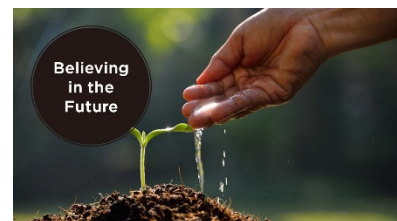
We all get songs stuck in our heads now and then, but it may be only preachers and professors who have words lodge in their minds. The word “supple” has been on my mind recently. The word usually makes me think of fine leather, soft, flexible, and durable, but, this week, I've been thinking about supple hearts.



The following was written to and for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. Listen to it with supple hearts:

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view. The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision. We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said. No prayer fully expresses our faith. No confession brings perfection. No pastoral visit brings wholeness. No program accomplishes the Church's mission. No set of goals and objectives includes everything. This is what we are about. We plant the seeds that one day will grow. We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations. We provide yeast that



produces far beyond our capabilities. We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and to do it well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest. We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.

I love that phrase, "We are prophets of a future not our own," which comes from Archbishop and martyr Oscar Romero, who also is the Catholic Church's newest saint. What a powerful reminder of our obligation not only to our children, but to *all* children and to the legacy we will leave behind.

Unfortunately, in our quest to leave a mark while we are here and to be remembered after we are gone, we too often use the wrong scorecard.

We sometimes can be disciples of James and John who tried to call shotgun when riding with Jesus. Their ambition is perfectly understandable to our modern minds, as is the resentment of the other 10, who probably mostly regretted that they weren't the first to ask for the best seats.



We all have been socialized to win, and Jesus acknowledges that this is how the world works. Then, however, he keeps turning that winning instinct on its head, not only by how he calls us to live, but by how he himself chose to live.

In February of 1968, only a few months before his assassination, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. preached a sermon entitled "The Drum Major Instinct." This morning's assigned Gospel lesson also was his text.



Dr. King said:

Jesus transformed the situation with James and John by giving a new definition of greatness. And you know how he said it? He said, "Now brethren, I can't give you greatness. And really, I can't make you first." This is what Jesus said to James and John. "You must earn it. True greatness comes not by favoritism, but by fitness. And the right hand and the left are not mine to give, they belong to those who are prepared." And so, Jesus gave us a new norm of greatness. If you want to be important—wonderful. If you want to be recognized—wonderful. If you want to be great—wonderful.

*But recognize that the one who is greatest among you shall be your servant. That's the new definition of greatness. And this morning, the thing that I like about it: by giving that definition of greatness, it means that everybody can be great, because everybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You don't have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don't have to know Einstein's theory of relativity to serve. You don't have to know the second theory of thermodynamics in physics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love. And **you** can be that servant.*

It is rare to find much ambition for **that** kind of greatness, even in the church. In my consulting work, I've discovered there is one change that will make all the difference in the world, but it is the hardest change of all: persuading people that they must take off their bibs and give up their role as consumers of church and put on their aprons to become the Church.



The shift is from believing the church is here to meet our needs to understanding that we are the church and are here to meet the needs of the same people Jesus came to serve.



As people following Jesus, that is to be our ultimate legacy: to be great because we serve. That greatness requires humility and empathy, and those things are the possessions of healthy and secure people. Arrogant, braggadocious, and abusive people try to appear intelligent, successful, and superior, but, the truth is, that behavior reveals that they are none of those things.

Emotionally healthy and holy people can serve because they know they are divinely beloved. Only one opinion matters, thus they live to please the God from whom they came and to whom they will return. Any other behavior is profane and insulting to the One who came from God and became a servant.

"The Drum Major Instinct" is not necessarily Martin Luther King Jr.'s best sermon, but it was a very important one. In his day, as in ours, there were major divisions in this country. People were alienated and angry.



The divisions were along lines of race, and class, and politics, and they were so deep that even conversations were difficult. Dr. King's call to become great by serving was not popular with people who were feeling angry and aggrieved,



but his sermon is remembered today, not only because of its message, but because he delivered it at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta without knowing it would be his last.

He gave several more speeches after that but never again standing in the pulpit of his church, leading his people in worship, and challenging them to be *prophets of a future not just their own*, but the children who would follow.

I quote Dr. King often, but, as the father of two daughters, I wanted my girls to grow up in church simply hearing a white man, no matter how well-intentioned, quote him. I wanted them to grow up in church hearing him, hearing his voice as I did when I was a young child.

Ironically, Dr. King ended his message talking about his own legacy and how he would like to be remembered: *(A recording of Rev. Dr. King delivering the following section of his sermon was played in the sanctuary.)*

Every now and then I guess we all think realistically (Yes, sir) about that day when we will be victimized with what is life's final common denominator—that something that we call death. We all think about it. And every now and then I think about my own death and I think about my own funeral. And I don't think of it in a morbid sense. And every now and then I ask myself, "What is it that I would want said?" And I leave the word to you this morning.

If any of you are around when I have to meet my day, I don't want a long funeral. And if you get somebody to deliver the eulogy, tell them not to talk too long. (Yes) And every now and then I wonder what I want them to say. Tell them not to mention that I have a Nobel Peace Prize—that isn't important. Tell them not to mention that I have three or four hundred other awards—that's not important. Tell them not to mention where I went to school. (Yes)

I'd like somebody to mention that day that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to give his life serving others. (Yes)

I'd like for somebody to say that day that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to love somebody.

I want you to say that day that I tried to be right on the war question. (Amen)

I want you to be able to say that day that I did try to feed the hungry. (Yes)

And I want you to be able to say that day that I did try in my life to clothe those who were naked. (Yes)

I want you to say on that day that I did try in my life to visit those who were in prison. (Lord)

I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity. (Yes)

Yes, if you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice. (Amen) Say that I was a drum major for peace. (Yes) I was a drum major for righteousness. And all of the other shallow things will

not matter. (Yes) I won't have any money to leave behind. I won't have the fine and luxurious things of life to leave behind. But I just want to leave a committed life behind. (Amen) And that's all I want to say.

*If I can help somebody as I pass along,
If I can cheer somebody with a word or song,
If I can show somebody he's traveling wrong,
Then my living will not be in vain.
If I can do my duty as a Christian ought,
If I can bring salvation to a world once wrought,
If I can spread the message as the master taught,
Then my living will not be in vain.*

Yes, Jesus, I want to be on your right or your left side, (Yes) not for any selfish reason. I want to be on your right or your left side, not in terms of some political kingdom or ambition. But I just want to be there in love and in justice and in truth and in commitment to others, so that we can make of this old world a new world.

The invitation to service and servanthood may well be the most important message of our day. In a time of arrogance and hubris, it may be the only way to save our nation from tearing itself apart. Ultimately, it also may be the only way to heal our own souls. We all must become great by becoming the servants of God we were created to be.

Amen.

To hear Rev. Dr. King's full sermon, search for "The Drum Major Instinct" on YouTube. You also can see a video of Rev. Piazza's complete sermon, which includes the audio clip of Rev. Dr. King, at fpcnc.org/worship.