

Our Presbyterian Book of Forms – the basis for much of our behaviour, all church discipline, and the model for conducting church ‘business’, opens with the words “To take away all occasion for tyranny...”

The phrase is borrowed from reformation era documents that the church used to organize itself, in opposition to the pyramid scheme that the church had become in the Middle Ages. True, the Holy Trinity was at the top of the pyramid, but there was a mess of officious clergy in the middle of that pyramid. The people of God were at the bottom, and the reformers vowed ‘never again.’

I leave it to you to decide if that intent has been successful, but you need to know that the Presbyterian Church in Canada (among others) is organized around more equitable principles, and that’s as it should be...but we don’t go far enough.

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There is a ‘soft hierarchy’ in our system. We set people apart by ordination - both to the office of ruling elder and teaching elder - and I do hold an office which suggests some degree of status. (I also have a pretty posh office by church standards, which is cool, but barely necessary.)

Still, we try to organize this Presbyterian Church of ours around the model of service that Jesus set for us – and this is especially true (or it should be) for those who are called and ordained to positions of responsibility and authority.

It’s a delicate balancing act. Titles and clothing and office space are privileges. One needs to be careful, and to be mindful of Jesus’ words and Jesus’ example. Because it is easy to forget ourselves.

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We had an ‘incident’ at St John’s this week – a crime of opportunity that resulted in the loss of one of our cameras and part of our cordless mic set. It was irritating. It is maddening and damned inconvenient. The kind of thing that has people saying ‘how could this happen to us?’ Trust me, I went through all those phases in my reaction to the discovery of the missing goods.

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There was even part of me that foolishly imagined that St John's – (*of all places!*) – might be immune from this sort of petty mischief.

We've long since proven that we are willing (and usually able) to respond to people in need. If you are in a bad way, **just ask**, and we'll do our best to help. That's who we are, and how we want to be known in the community.

This should not have happened TO US! Doesn't that person know who we are? What we do?? Why not just ask for help.

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By Wednesday morning I had almost exhausted my indignation – and I had turned my eyes once again to the texts for today.

Job, having tossed his anger and indignation back and forth with his moderately helpful friends gets a dose of reality from the Creator of Every. Single. Thing.

If you want to argue, God says, let's start by declaring our qualifications – let's set the table. This is who I AM - says God in the space of two magnificently excessive chapters – Now, let's compare notes.

Job will be forced to admit that his complaint comes to nothing in the grand scheme of things, and that God is not only able to behave as God pleases, but God can be magnificently excessive when God chooses – both in the giving and the taking. With God's mystery and majesty established, balance will be returned to Job's tiny little portion of Creation – fade to black.

And then, the Gospel. 'Make us your equals' ask the sons of Zebedee. And as it happens, equal **is exactly** what Jesus had in mind for his disciples – just not in the way they imagined.

First of all, the gift of heavenly glory (three-seater throne in the heavenly realm) is not Jesus' to give. As we learn from Job, God knows God's own mind, and will do what seems best when the time comes, and the mystery of the how-why-when and to-whom is part of the beauty of being allied with God in a journey of faith. But the real twist to this Gospel encounter is that the equality on offer is **equality in service.**

I've worked in the service industry. There's something gratifying about having people come through the doors grumpy or with a problem in hand and sending them out with that problem solved. Incredibly gratifying, but not glorious. Not financially rewarding (though it was always 'money-for-service' so someone is making a profit...) Not the sort of thing that sets you up for an easy retirement. Just gratifying. And Jesus tells his disciples that service is his business...and that it should be ours too.

The glory is not the goal – entitlement is out of the question. The notion that we are immune from the indignities of real life – that the church is somehow protected from the petty misery of vandalism, or theft, or slander, or (better yet) the studied indifference that most people under 50 have for organized religion – to imagine that we 'deserve better' is just another arrogant mistake that we make. To claim a privileged position as the church is to accept the mantle of tyranny.

To imagine that we ought not to be affected by the desperation that drives people to what we blithely call 'anti-social behaviour' is to miss Jesus' point entirely. We open ourselves to damage when we open our doors to damaged people. We cannot remain unaffected by our encounters with those who come to us for help. We share the humanity of those who have been humbled by homelessness and unemployment, and addiction, and unspeakable stories of pain and loss. We don't gain any social status, but we gain insight – we gain humanity – we come closer to the mind of God. And the world we live in doesn't always appreciate that perspective.

Jesus broke bread with 'tax collectors and sinners' and the 'authorities' in their arrogant righteousness – with their sense of propriety - conspired to have him executed for it.

No one who pledges to 'follow Jesus' should be surprised when something uncomfortable follows that decision – the surprising thing is when comfort and status and acclaim become the hallmarks of Christianity. That is the model we must dismantle. In truth, that model eventually tears itself down.

Ours is a much humbler path:

"...whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave (servant) of all."

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Tuesday's theft hurt no one. It was inconvenient, and irritating, and we've learned a lesson about complacency with our new technology, but it's just stuff, and we can afford to buy more. What really matters now is that the lesson we've learned *is not* "we'd better be more careful" (but we will) - no, the lesson is (I think) "how can we better serve people whose desperation is so great that they imagine a stolen camera is the best answer to their predicament."

This is what service in Jesus' name looks like – the door is opened again and again. We take a few lumps and learn our lessons, not to get 'more secure and establish our privileged position,' but to be BETTER SERVANTS TO THOSE IN NEED.

That is what Jesus did, and we who would follow Jesus are invited to put aside our indignation – ignore the affront to our privilege – and get right back to the work of serving.