LEADERSHIP REFLECTION:
BUILDING ORGANIZATIONS LIKE JESUS DID

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This essay seeks to explore building of the Christian community, exemplified by Jesus’ interactions with the disciples on the road to Emmaus, as a model for strategic leadership and the promise this model holds for twenty-first century organizations and leaders. Leadership strategy, as explored in this essay, will demonstrate how organizations can use Christ's example to help make the “leap” from knowledge to understanding, to value service and honoring as basic tenets of the organizational culture, and to invest in people as a foundational element of the organization.

I. INTRODUCTION

The model of Jesus’ interactions with the disciples on the road to Emmaus has many implications for the twenty-first century organization and its leaders. In this story, Jesus challenges the disciples’ cultural boundaries and turns the status quo upside down with his lack of concern for his position and honor. Rather than conform to the expected behaviors of first-century society, the risen Savior reaches out to two hurting, discouraged disciples with compassion, serving them and creating the foundation for how the Christian community will operate. Jesus establishes that knowing him and understanding his mission flows from the study of scripture and the breaking of bread.¹

In this essay, I will highlight three of Jesus’ actions that founded the Christian community and explore how those actions would be effective for contemporary organizations and leaders. In the Emmaus passage, Luke 24:13-35, Jesus acts to:

- Help those around him make the “leap” from knowledge to understanding
- Place the values of service to others and hospitality to all above personal honor or “rightful” place in the organization
- Treat his disciples as individuals worthy of dignity and honor

**Making the Leap to Understanding**

The strategic design of the early Church communities was founded on two pillars: knowing Christ through scripture and through the breaking of bread. In the first half of this passage, verses 13-27 establish the first pillar and demonstrate the impacts of Jesus’ teaching his fulfillment of the scriptures, “beginning with Moses and all the prophets” (v. 27). The contrast between the knowledge the disciples on the road to Emmaus had and their inability to apply that knowledge to the events around them until Jesus himself made understanding known is clearly shown.

Knowing Christ through scripture is more than just having knowledge. It’s even more than being present in the time that history-making events are occurring. The disciples walking to Emmaus had been with Christ. They had met him, followed him, heard him speak, and seen him heal; they’d eaten with him and prayed with him. Yet that didn’t make them able to see Christ in scripture. Cleopas and his companion were Jews. They had studied the scripture and knew the Torah. But their conception of Jesus as the Messiah—the one who would take away the Roman oppression and create a free Israel—blinded them to seeing his true mission and deafened their ears to hearing his true words. Even when Jesus clearly stated what would happen (cf. Lk 9:22, 18:31-34), the meaning of his words was hidden from the disciples and they truly did not understand.

So, on that Sunday after Jesus was crucified, these two disciples leave Jerusalem, the known center of Israel, and head toward Emmaus. The disciples are discouraged, sad, confused, and, even though they had heard the reports that the tomb is empty, they are walking away from their calling as disciples. On their journey, they meet a stranger who questions them and learns of their experiences, disappointment, and their lack of understanding. Imagine their astonishment, perhaps even their affront, at having this stranger rebuke them for

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2 All scripture references are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible unless otherwise noted.
5 Maxey, “The Road to Emmaus,” 117.
their foolishness and lack of comprehension. But Jesus does not leave them in their uncomprehending state. Instead, “beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures” (Lk 24:27).

The significance of this “session” of teaching cannot be overstated. Not only did understanding dawn as Jesus taught these disciples, but he laid the foundation for the first pillar of the Christian community—study of the scriptures as a means to know him. This meant that one could know Jesus without having physically met Jesus. A powerful certainty of the “rightness” of following Jesus could be assured simply through seeking to know him by reading and studying scripture. Thus Jesus’ fulfillment of the scriptures assured the vision of God’s salvation could progress throughout the ages.

As leaders, part of our strategy must be to help those around us make the “leap” from knowledge to understanding so that they, like the disciples, are enabled to progress. Organizations that develop the ability to draw understanding from knowledge are able to harvest the diverse insights that result and deepen strategic thinking. These individual contributions enable the organization to meet the challenges facing the business. The disciples had the knowledge of the scriptures but no understanding of how to apply that knowledge to the current situation. Contemporary organizations must make sure that beyond knowing the strategy, everyone understands that strategy so that they are able to apply that knowledge to the current situation. To accomplish this, the organization, its leaders, and its followers, must be willing to study and to learn with the goal of building not just knowledge but understanding.

The strength of learning organizations is in the ability not just to acquire knowledge but to reflect on the implications, analyze how what they do contributes to organizational issues, and find ways to change for improvement. This becomes then a “knowing” of the self within the context of the organization, much like Jesus became known to the disciples within the context of the scriptures. This study and learning allows people in the organization to connect with, to “know” the organization, and encourages the deepening of knowledge to understanding that leads to progress and improvement.

Conferring Honor and Value by Serving

In the actions of Jesus in this passage, the social and cultural norms of honor and the place of privilege are shown in contrast against the learning the disciples have absorbed regarding hospitality to the poor, sick, hungry—"sinners." During this encounter, Jesus ignores the standard cultural expectations that those who invite someone to stay with them are the hosts. In this case, Cleopas and his friend have asked, really pleaded, with Jesus to stay the night with them rather than journey further. As those who extended the invitation, the disciples would be expected to provide for their guest and "host" the evening meal. Were he following cultural and social norms, Jesus should expect to be given the place of honor and served, as was his due as the stranger and invited guest.

But that is not what happens. Without great fuss or fanfare, Jesus takes over the start of the meal, and seated with the disciples he "took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them" (v. 30). In these very ordinary circumstances, the most extraordinary of things happens: the disciples realize they are in the presence of Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen Lord.

Through these actions Jesus sets into place a foundational act for the early Christian church—the breaking of bread. The act of taking, blessing, breaking, and giving was one the disciples had seen many times. Jesus' actions set this act as a second method of knowing him. Studying and understanding the scriptures reveals Christ's fulfillment of them and shows a way to know Jesus Christ through God's Word. Participating in the breaking of bread provides a second method of knowing Jesus, through the symbolic act of entering into partaking of the body and blood of the Savior.

Jesus never did anything he did not want his disciples to emulate. Jesus never said anything he did not want his disciples to hear, repeat, know, and understand. His leadership was 100 percent authentic, actionable, and pleasing to God. He was willing to repeat, over and over, those actions that were the central themes of his ministry in order to allow the significance and the familiarity of those acts to become a method for knowing and recognizing him.

As leaders in the twenty-first century, Christians are called to place the value of service to others above personal honor or our "rightful" place in the

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13 Maxey, "The Road to Emmaus."
15 Saunders, "Discernment on the Way."
17 Maxey, "The Road to Emmaus."
organization, just as Jesus demonstrated. Jesus’ actions can be integrated into the culture of an organization through the taking of both symbolic and substantive actions. Equalizing the physical environment so that all members of the organization have equivalent space, common language, and elimination of executive “perks” such as reserved parking and rooms only for executives’ use contribute to the symbolic leveling of an organization. Eliminating pay inequalities and providing everyone in the organization with the opportunity to benefit from achieved profit are substantive equalizing actions. These actions contribute to an environment of equality that clearly demonstrates individuals in the organization are equally valued and expected to value others.

A contemporary example of this principle at work can be found in Southwest Airlines. In an industry rife with exploding costs and shrinking profits, Southwest posted a profit for a record thirty-three straight years as of 2006. This remarkable performance has at its roots the valuing of employees as partners, innovators, and empowered decision makers. Employees are valued and invested in, a concept made evident not only by the organization’s excellent performance but by the fact that Southwest does not have a Human Resources department—it has a People and Leadership Development department.

Jesus taught his disciples through his words, in parables, in demonstrations of healing, through prayer, and obedience to God. His actions, words, and behavior were a metaphor encouraging the disciples to think and act beyond their culture and circumstances.

Leadership in the twenty-first century needs this same ability to find metaphors that offer pictures of the values held. Metaphors challenge the entire organization to develop strategy for understanding and acting appropriately to fulfill the purposes of the organization. The power of providing different ways for the vision and mission of the organization to be represented and communicated enables the strategy of the organization to be known and understood by everyone. The use of metaphors clarifies and enforces the decision making and action that aligns with the vision and mission allowing each member of the organization to address complex problems, to think and act beyond the current culture and circumstances.

Investing in Our People

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20 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
25 Sanders, “Discernment on the Way.”
In this passage is also a demonstration of the tremendous patience of God. Jesus, while upbraiding the disciples for their slowness to believe, does not leave them in this state. Nor does he direct them to “make sense” of all they have learned and seen on their own.26 After three full years of mentoring, guiding, teaching, leading, and serving the disciples, after clearly stating the course of his life and death and the purposes of both, what does Jesus do when he finds these two disciples discouraged and leaving the city? He teaches them again, spends more time with them, and has a meal with them, demonstrating through his words and his actions who their companion is and the ways to know him.

In this act, Jesus establishes the early Christian church as a place to learn and be upheld by those in the community with the goal of becoming a faithful follower of Jesus Christ.27 His actions move against the cultural norm of “wantlessness.” This concept permeated the culture of Jesus’ time with the belief that local group obligations, limited resources, the requirement to pay rent, and supply a household meant there was no “extra” leftover. Each person not of the wealthy classes would have to make do only with what was available.28 Rather than underscore that there is “only so much” of God’s kingdom available to the disciples, Jesus instead demonstrates limitless patience and abundance of life found in the scriptures and through the breaking of bread.29

In today’s economy, there is kind of corollary “wantlessness” in many organizations. Rather than seeking to be challenged, invested in, and nurtured, employees are instead told they should be “grateful” simply to have any job. The message is to continually do more with less30 and just be glad to still be paid. As a result, many contemporary organizations are unwilling to “waste” time on teaching and mentoring resources. Unlike the time Jesus invested in his disciples, the semi-annual or annual performance review process in our contemporary organizations does not tolerate three years of incomprehension, mistaken purpose, and inability to enter fully into the performance of the assigned duties, even under the extraordinary circumstances of the loss of the leader. Contemporary organizations want performance that benefits the bottom line; human capital that contributes to the mission and goals of the organization and adds value without increasing expense.31

Jesus had disciples—followers if you will. But they weren’t just “resources” that followed Jesus around, doing what he did. They were people. In the intimate act of sharing a meal, an act Jesus repeated with his disciples many times, Jesus’ true identity was made clear. As he treated them as people to be served,

27 Betz, “The Origin and Nature.”
28 Robbins, Exploring the Texture.
their eyes were opened and they recognized him. Jesus’ ability to see each disciple as a person, to treat each in a way that allowed them to learn from him, know him, recognize him, and demonstrate his teaching to others conferred dignity and honor on each disciple without regard for their social standing, family background, wealth, or personality.

Contemporary organizations need to treat their resources not as “human capital” but as people, individuals with unique capabilities, worthy of dignity and honor. There must be an acknowledgement of the power of dealing intimately and repeatedly with each person as an individual and not just as a piece of human capital whose worth to the organization is measured solely as a part of the pool of human capital that propels the organization to success.

Consider TDIndustries (TDI), an “employee-owned company with corporate offices in Dallas, Texas. The firm has become one of America’s premier facilities management and specialty construction companies with annual revenues of approximately $300 million, more than 1700 TDPartners, and offices in Austin, Houston, San Antonio, Dallas, Fort Worth and Phoenix.” TDI has been named to Fortune magazine’s “100 Best Companies to Work For” list every year since 1998.

How does TDI achieve such significant results? Through implementation of and an on-going commitment to servant leadership as the foundation on which the culture of the organization is built. TDI’s website describes the culture this way: “TDIndustries strives to model the management style defined by Robert Greenleaf as ‘Servant Leadership.’ We firmly believe our shift to this culture during the 70s has made us one of the most unique companies in the country—it is to this practice that we attribute our many years of success.”

Quoted in the Fortune magazine article “The Top 100 Best Companies to Work for in America,” one employee of TDI described the impact of the culture of the organization by saying, “This company makes you feel like a human being again.”

By making service to others a key tenet of the organization, TDI has made each employee a partner rather than a piece of human capital. Doing so has not only made employee feel human, it has built an unarguable record of success as both an organization and an employer.

Conclusion

Jesus’ teaching of his fulfillment of the scriptures and modeling of service through the breaking of bread served to establish the foundation of the Christian community. Jesus used these principles to found the early Christian community.

34 Ibid.
and created churches that continue to flourish and thrive 2,000+ years after their establishment.

As a result, the strategies Jesus used on the road to Emmaus present a compelling model for the contemporary leader and organization. As we seek to emulate Christ, to assist others in making the "leap" from knowledge to understanding, to serve without regard for personal honor or place and treat members of the organization like valued and respected partners, we can build effective contemporary organizations and leaders with the strategies Jesus used on the road to Emmaus.

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