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The Tides of Life (Chicago)

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MBN Luncheon
Union League Club
Chicago, IL
December 5, 2014

“The Tides of Life”

C. William Pollard

I am delighted to be with you today and to share some thoughts about the choices we have as we sail and steer our ship of life through the changing Tides of Life.

My favorite past time is sailing. I have had the opportunity to do ocean sailing in both the Atlantic and Pacific and also sailing in our great Lake Michigan. However, most of my sailing has been in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin – a place where our family gathers every summer.

To navigate, a sailor must always deal with the wind. A force that is essential to move forward and a force that he cannot see and is out of his control.

And so it is about life. There are forces in life that affect who we are but are not in our control. We did not determine when we were born – the family we were born into -- our gender – our level of intelligence. We do not control the weather, the forces of our economy or the actions of our government. Yet we all have to make choices to navigate how we shall live and what we should do.

As I say this I am reminded of a talk C. W. Lewis – the famous Oxford Don – gave to the freshmen entering Oxford in the fall of 1939. The title of his talk was “Learning During a Time of War.” His talk centered on

how to make good choices in life even though there were forces out of their control that would affect their life. He emphasized the importance of “seizing the day” and to take advantage of their time at Oxford now to learn – even though by the end of the year their lives may be disrupted by the war that had been recently declared between Germany and France and England.

He also reminded the students that they had the opportunity now to respond to the most important question of life, “the question of God.” Did they or did they not believe in God? If they did, had they chosen to have a relationship with Him? These decisions were exclusively in their control and they would affect the way they would live in this life and beyond this life.

So how do we make the good choices, the right choices and not the bad ones or the wrong only?

Here give the story of the dress shirt

And what it represents – Bernie Madoff.

For Madoff, the making of money and the creation of wealth for himself became an all-consuming passion. He made choices to do so at the expense of many others including his own family. It has resulted in the poverty of his soul.

Most of us here today have spent a good part of our life doing business, making money, serving customers, and hopefully creating some wealth as we do. How do we do what is right as we do business? Not to allow self to

control and instead to become other-oriented as we lead. Is there room for God's hand to be on the tiller of our ship? Does God belong in business?

I will share a few thoughts and reflections on my own life as I seek to respond to these questions.

To begin with, I am thankful for the heritage of Christian parents. They were faithful followers of Jesus Christ in both word and deed.

During my grade-school years, there came a time when I realized there was a choice for me to make about whether I wanted have a relationship with God. My mother helped me understand the significance of the choice before me by sharing passages from the Bible that pointed out the reality of sin, the need for forgiveness, and God's offer of love and forgiveness through the

redemptive work of His Son, Jesus Christ. She emphasized that God wanted a relationship with me, but first I had to choose to accept His offer. It was a choice that only I could make. Once made, the choice would be a completed transaction with God and I would begin the process of learning to know Him and be known by Him.

Because the Christian life results in a growing relationship with God, it has provided me a framework for making choices leading to a life worth living. There have been failures, mistakes, and poor choices along the way, but God has used them to teach me about repentance, forgiveness, and His faithful love.

In addition to my parents, many others have had a profound influence on my life starting with my wife, Judy, who has been my bride for 55 years, my four children, my

predecessors at ServiceMaster Ken Hansen and Ken Wessner, and Peter Drucker who is often referred to as the father of modern day management and who was both a mentor and friend.

When it came to questions of leadership, Drucker would often remind me: “A leader has only one choice to make – to lead or mislead.” He would go on to say a leader must know what he believes and why he believes it. He must know where he is going and why it is important for people to follow. He would then conclude that when there is misleadership or an absence thereof, there will be detrimental results – a net loss to the people who are following. There is no middle ground.

For Drucker, leadership was not about what is often emphasized in many of the popular books on leadership,

including "leadership qualities," "personality traits," "charisma," or a list of the "seven or ten characteristics of a good leader." Leadership was not about a title or position, it was not in and of itself, good or desirable. Drucker would then go on and say that leadership was just a "means". To "what end" was the crucial question. For Drucker, the end of leadership is the people who follow, the direction they are headed, and who they are becoming.

To accomplish this end objective, Drucker would emphasize that a leader must understand the make-up of the human condition and recognize that our humanity cannot be defined solely by its physical or rational nature, but it also has a spiritual dimension.

It is this spiritual side of our humanity that influences our character, our ability to determine right and wrong, to recognize good and evil, to make moral judgments, and to know God and understand His redemptive love.

On questions of faith and the nature of our humanity, Drucker was profoundly influenced by the writings of Kierkegaard. For Drucker, faith brought meaning and purpose to life. In his essay entitled “The Unfashionable Kierkegaard”, he said:

“Human existence is possible as existence not in despair, as existence not in tragedy, but is possible as existence in faith. Faith is the belief that in God the impossible is possible, that in Him, time and eternity are one, that both life and death are meaningful.

Faith is the knowledge that man is a creature – not

autonomous, not the master, not the end, not the center – and yet responsible and free.”

One of the reasons why Drucker was so interested in ServiceMaster was our four objectives: To honor God in all we do; To help people develop; To pursue excellence; and To grow profitably. He saw us not just as a business firm making money by serving customers, but also as a moral community held together by a commitment to a common purpose of seeking to develop the whole person.

Our first two objectives were end goals; the second two were means goals.

We didn't use that first objective as a basis for exclusion. It was, in fact, the reason for our promotion of diversity as we recognized that different people with different beliefs were all part of God's world.

As a business firm, we wanted to excel at generating profits and creating value for our shareholders. If we didn't want to play by these rules, we didn't belong in the ball game. But also, we tried to encourage an environment where the work place could be an open community where the question of a person's moral and spiritual development and the existence of God and how one related the claims of his or her faith with their work, were issues of discussion, debate, and yes, even learning and understanding. We considered the people of our firm as, in fact, the soul of the firm.

It did not mean that everything was done right. We experienced our share of mistakes. We sometimes failed and did things wrong. But because of a stated standard and a reason for that standard, we could not hide our

mistakes. Mistakes were regularly flushed out in the open for correction and, in some cases, for forgiveness, and leaders could not protect themselves at the expense of those they were leading.

The process of seeking understanding and application of these objectives at all levels of the organization was a never-ending task. It involved matters of the heart as well as the head and it was not susceptible to standard management techniques of implementation or measurement. While at times it was discouraging, it also was energizing as one realized the continuing potential for creativity, innovation, and growth as there was a focus on the development of the whole person.

In responding to the needs of the whole person, the leader must go beyond getting the right things done

through others. People need to be treated as the subject, not just the object of work. This is what servant leadership is all about.

Servant leadership is not a new idea. It has roots in the teachings of Jesus as he met with disciples that night before He was betrayed. It would be the last time He would be with them before He was crucified.

As He took a towel and a basin of water and washed their feet, he was reminding them of what would become a changing role for them in the future. They would no longer be disciples. They would become leaders in spreading the word of God's redeeming love and in building His church.

He was teaching them in a very practical and poignant way that to be effective as leaders of His church,

it would not be about them - their titles, or positions of authority, or the platform that they would assume.

Instead, it was about the people who would follow and the nurturing and growth of those people in their faith and example of life so that they would be able to multiply themselves in the lives of others.

Does this example fit in today's world more than 2,000 years later? There is certainly no scarcity of feet to wash and towels are always available. I suggest that the only limitation, if there is one, is the ability of people in leadership to exercise a spirit of being humble, to subordinate self, and to become engaged with compassion for those they lead.

When we lead by serving, we assume a commitment to be an example in both our public and private life for

others to follow, to be an initiator for change and growth, and to be always willing to do whatever we ask others to do.

Servant leadership has always been a learning experience for me. One of those lessons of learning occurred when I first joined ServiceMaster.

I had been recruited to join the company by Ken Hansen, who was then its Chairman, and Ken Wessner, who was then President and CEO.

The two Kens wanted me to come to the firm and initially head up the legal and financial affairs of the company, reporting directly to Ken Wessner. During the recruiting process, they had shared their vision for the future and inferred that someday I might have an opportunity to lead the company. And so, as I came to

that final day of decision about whether I would join the ServiceMaster team and as I sat in Ken Hansen's office waiting to sign the final documents of employment, I decided I needed to know more about exactly what I would have to do to be CEO of this company.

TELL STORY

As I made the decision that day to join the ServiceMaster team, Ken would test my commitment and also take time to teach me what it was like to walk in the shoes of the people I would lead. During the first eight weeks of my initial assignment as a senior vice president, I spent my days out working with the service workers doing the service tasks that we perform for our customers.

In so doing, I learned the reality of my dependence upon and responsibility to the people I would lead. Little

did I realize then that this would ultimately involve over 200,000 people as we grew to serve over 10 million customers in 45 different countries. This experience often reminded me of my own imperfections, the need to admit my mistakes, ask for forgiveness, and seek guidance from above.

When I became CEO of the firm, the faces of our service workers would often flash across my mind as I was faced with those inevitable judgment calls between the rights and wrongs of running a business. The integrity of my actions had to pass their scrutiny. Otherwise I was deceiving myself and those I was committed to serve.

Mistakes in leading people are often painful. Implicit in leadership is the power and authority to make decisions that affect others. You can be right in your intent and

decision but wrong in how you use power to implement that decision.

The mistakes I have made as a leader, that hurt the most, are those that have resulted in breached relationships with others.

Sometimes in seeking to achieve specific performance goals, I have pressed too hard for results without understanding the subjective factors of fear, insecurity, or risk that were influencing substandard performance of the individuals involved. The pain of honestly facing your mistakes and seeking forgiveness is part of the learning process of seeking to serve as you lead and, yes, often results in a growing relationship of trust with those you lead.

Our objectives were a constant reminder that there was only one standard when it came to the treatment of people. It required both fairness and accountability. They became an organizing principle for the firm wherever we operated.

For me, the world of business became a channel for fulfilling and living my faith; a channel that reached from a janitor's closet in Saudi Arabia to the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, China – from sweeping streets in Osaka, Japan to ringing the bell of the New York Stock Exchange. It provided me the opportunity to embrace and engage those who did not believe the way I did, but whom God loves and who, by my words and actions, should see the reality of His love.

As Joshua came to the closing days of his leadership of the nation of Israel, he challenged the people to fear God and serve Him with faithfulness.

It was a challenge, not a command, for God does not compel anyone to follow or worship Him. In Joshua's conclusion, he emphasized this point when he said, "But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve . . . but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

Now, the Hebrew word that is translated "serve" is Avodah, and can also mean worship or work. Yes, that's right – for those of us who are Christians our work, whatever it is, can also be a worship to the God we love as we serve and live our faith. The choice is ours to make. For those who have not yet responded to God's

offer of redemptive love, the choice to do so today is yours.

So as you steer your ship of life is there room for God's hand on the tiller?
