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The Tides of Life (Convene CEO Summit)

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“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 and work 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 the Pacific. 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; a force that one can feel but does not see; and a force that is out of one’s control.

And so it is about our 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 global economy, or the actions of our government. Yet we all have to make choices about how to navigate this life of ours and to fulfill our responsibilities.

As I say this, I am reminded of a talk C. S. 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 lives. He emphasized the importance of “seizing the day” and taking 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 & England.

He also reminded the students that they had the opportunity now to make a choice about 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.

Three hundred years before C. S. Lewis, there was another Oxford scholar that made a profound statement about our choice and the importance of seeking and choosing truth.

Etched in stone on the floor of the chapel of Christ Church College at Oxford University are the following words of John Locke:

“I know there is truth opposite falsehood and that it may be found if people will search for it, is worth the seeking”.

So as we come to this time of Convening and learning from each other, how do we, as Christian business people, choose to apply the truth of our faith to the doing of our business? Is there anything in common between God and profit? Between our worship in church on Sunday and the work of serving customers and making money on Monday?

Or are these just two different worlds separated by a wall with the sacred on one side and the secular on the other?

Does the world that God so loves as described in John 3:16 include people working in the marketplace, many of whom may never darken the door of a church? Can the marketplace be a mission field? Or is it just a big sinful hole of greed where profit is maximized by a few at the expense of many and where the “master” is the love of money?

As we conduct business in a growing pluralistic and secular society, is there room for raising the question of God as the source of our moral authority? Can the business firm make money, create wealth and also

become a moral community for the development of human character? Can our leadership make a difference?

As we try to answer these questions, we should first recognize the reality that it is people who make markets work, people who can be right or wrong, good or evil, honest or dishonest, prudent or selfish. People who are imperfect, weak, sinners, and yet made in God's image with dignity and worth. People who will have a life of eternity with or without God.

Those of us in the market who are followers of Jesus Christ should seek to provide an example for others to follow. We need to bring our faith to work on Monday and learn to integrate the claims of our faith with the demands of our work. To affirm our faith but not impose it. To seek to honor God in what we do and say. To be Ambassadors of Christ so God can make His appeal through us.

In so doing, we should be concerned not only about what people do and how they do it in their work, but also about who people are becoming in the process.

This important concept relating to the responsibility and accountability of a leader for the development of the people being led

became a reality for me as I was mentored by my predecessors at ServiceMaster and also through the writings, friendship, and advice of Peter Drucker.

Drucker, who is often referred to as the father of modern-day management, reminds us that the management of people is a liberal art and as such requires an understanding of the human condition. Drucker says that our humanity cannot be defined solely by its physical or rational nature, but 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, and to make moral judgments. It is the source for developing a philosophy of life that provides a moral and ethical standard that is not relative, that is other oriented, and functions even when there are no prescribed rules.

Management as a liberal art is about treating people as the subject of work not just the object of work. For the leader, it's about assuming the responsibility for crafting a culture of character and recognizing that the business firm has a duty of care not only to the customers it serves but also to societies within which it operates.

To be effective and responsible in so doing, Drucker concludes that leaders must be able to draw upon the knowledge and insights of the humanities and social sciences, including psychology, philosophy, economics, history, and ethics.

But he also goes on to say that leaders should have an appreciation of the role of faith in determining the ultimate purpose and meaning for our life and our work. It is this spiritual dimension of our humanity that raises the question of God and His role in our life and our work.

On questions of faith and the nature of our humanity, Drucker was profoundly influenced by the writings of Kierkegaard. In Drucker's essay entitled *The Unfashionable Kierkegaard*, he comments:

"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."

Thus, the learning and understanding of what it means to lead and manage people in the marketplace need not be divorced from questions of

faith or the role of God in one's life. While for some in the secular academy or in our secular society this conclusion may be difficult to accept, others however are ready to recognize its validity.

In his book, *The Fourth Great Awakening*, Robert Fogel, an economist who served at University of Chicago and a Nobel Prize winner, traced the history of religious faith in America and its effect on our society and economy. In so doing, Fogel concluded that a major issue in our culture today was simply a lack of a "distribution" of what he referred to as "spiritual assets". There was, he said, a void in our society in the development of the character of people and a provision for their spiritual needs. He also went on to say that in order for the business firm of the future to resolve the growing complexities of ethical issues, it will have to acquire more "spiritual capital."

At ServiceMaster, my predecessors decided to be overt about this issue and raised the question of God in our mission statement.

Our Company objectives were simply stated: To honor God in all we do; To help people develop; To pursue excellence; and To grow profitably. Those first two objectives were end goals; the second two were means goals.

We did not 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.

For us, the common link was people – every one of whom had been created in the image and likeness of God with their own fingerprint of potential.

We tried to encourage an environment where the work place could be an open community where questions of a person's moral and spiritual development, the existence of God, how one could have a relationship with Him, and how one could relate 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 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 often it was not susceptible to standard management techniques of implementation or measurement.

Now as a follower of Jesus Christ, one of the best ways I found to engage the people I worked with and to lead in the development of the firm as a moral community was to seek to serve as I led. To reflect the principles that Jesus was teaching His disciples as He washed their feet, including that no leader was greater or had a self-interest more important than those being led.

In seeking to so serve, the truth of what I said could be measured by what I did and provided a platform for me to share my faith.

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 the 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.

Unfortunately, there are often many trappings around a position of leadership -- the perks or prestige of the office and the arrogance that can come as the result of success, that can tempt leaders to focus on self and think they have the answers rather than focusing on their responsibility to others. It is the evil of hubris. It is often subtle and can have a cumulative effect on judgment unless it is nipped in the bud.

Let me share an example about learning a lesson in this regard that occurred later on in my leadership responsibilities at ServiceMaster and reflects the continuing need to be aware of the subtle effect of hubris and the hand of God in turning a lesson learned into an opportunity to witness and share my faith.

One of the benefits of my friendship with Peter Drucker was that he never hesitated to point out those areas where I could improve my leadership. One of those important moments of learning occurred when we were traveling together to conduct a management seminar in Tokyo for Japanese business leaders.

After the seminar, Peter and I had dinner together. I shared with him my disappointment, and yes, even anger, over the fact that no one from the leadership team of our Japanese business partner had come to the seminar. They had been invited and had promised to attend. Since some of our current and prospective customers were in attendance, it would have provided an opportunity for them to learn and also to make important business connections.

I explained to Peter that we had recently decided to delay bringing one of our new service lines to Japan and that the leadership of our partner was no doubt upset with that decision. I explained that this was probably the reason they did not come.

I told Peter that I intended to cancel my trip to their headquarters in Osaka and take an earlier flight back to the States. Peter encouraged me to rethink my position and gave some advice, including his thoughts and understanding of Japanese culture. Although I listened to him, I made up my mind that I was not going to accept his advice and I would reschedule my flight the next morning.

When dinner was over, we returned to our respective hotel rooms. At about 10:30 that evening, I received a call from Peter asking me if I would come to his room. He was still concerned about my reactions and wanted a further discussion with me.

As Peter opened the door to his hotel room, I could tell by the look on his face that he was troubled. He told me to sit on the chair near his bed. He then sat down on the edge of his bed and looked me straight in the eye. "Bill," he said, "you are suffering from hubris. It's time for you to eat some humble pie."

He went on to explain how quickly leaders can lose touch with the reality of their responsibility when they think their pride is at risk. He pointed out that my job as leader was to go to Osaka, meet with our business partners, resolve our differences, and rebuild a relationship of

trust. This result was needed for the continued growth of our business in Japan and for the opportunities it would provide the people in our business. It was my job to do this as a leader, and it was something that I could not delegate. As he closed, he reminded me of something he had told me before, "Remember, Bill.

A leader has only one choice to make – to lead or mislead – there is no middle ground."

It was great advice. The next morning I was on the train to Osaka, and my meeting there with the President of our partner and his team accomplished the right result for our business and for our people. I did have to eat some humble pie. The leadership lesson was clear. My leadership responsibility was not about me or my feelings. It was about what should be done for our business and our people. But the story doesn't end there.

**(Tell Story of President Komai's funeral 6 months later
where I was asked to speak
and share my faith)**

As we invest ourselves in the lives of others, people will respond. God will provide the opportunities to share and speak the truth of our faith.

As part of expanding our business to China, I made numerous trips there.

After one of those trips, I received this letter from one of our Chinese employees who had been traveling with me as an interpreter. "When I grew up in China, religions were forbidden and Mao's book became our Bible. When I was five or six years old I could recite Mao quotations and even use them to judge and lecture the kids in the neighborhood.

Mao said, 'Serve the people. Leaders should be public servants.' This coincides with some of ServiceMaster's moral standards. When I think deeply, I see the difference that makes one work so successfully and the other collapse fatally. It must be the starting point of ServiceMaster to honor God, and that every individual has been created in His image with dignity and worth.

ServiceMaster is designed to be a big, tall tree with strong roots which penetrate extensively to almost every corner of a person's daily life. It is still growing in mine. And I am still learning."

Shu is a thinking person. She felt accepted and respected in her work environment. She was confronted with life choices that went beyond doing a job and earning a living; choices about who she was becoming and how she could relate to God. She was growing and developing an understanding of herself and the purpose and meaning for her life.

For me, the world of business became a channel of distribution 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. The marketplace provided an opportunity for me to embrace and engage those who did not believe the way I did, but who God so loved and who had a choice to make regarding the acceptance or rejection of that love.

There is a common language of performance in the market that **crosses** secular, cultural, and religious barriers. When there is performance, people listen. And yes, as some people listen, they respond to the redemptive message of God's love.

As one invests their life in people, the road may be bumpy and at times there may seem to be more downside than upside with little or no

measurable results from the investment – God’s measurement, however, is with eternity in view. It was C. S. Lewis who reminded us that, “There are no ordinary people, you’ve never talked to a mere mortal, nations, cultures, arts, civilizations, they are mortal and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals we joke with, work with, marry, snub and exploit.”

The investment is there for us to make as we integrate the claims of our faith with the demands of our work and understand there is a virtue in living a profitable life for our Lord and Savior.

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 – our work, whatever it is,

can also be a worship to the God we love as we serve others, share, and live our faith. Our work is our worship as we bring alive the reality that Jesus lived and died for the purpose that those He created and loved may know Him as God and Savior.

God has called us to be in the world but not part of it. He has called us to be excellent in what we do, whether we call it a job, profession, ministry, or service to others, and when we excel in what we do, whatever that may be, and we live our faith in a way that cannot be ignored, we have the platform to proclaim and share our faith. The choice is ours. As we navigate this ship of life, we know there will be forces of “wind” that will not be in our control, but we also know that the God we love and serve is in control, and He knows the end from the beginning.

Will we be a vehicle for use by God to help people find “The Truth” that is not only worth the seeking but also has an eternal value?

* * * *

T. S. Eliot's *Choruses from a Rock*:

"What life have you if you not have life together?

There is no life that is not in community.

And no community not lived in praise of God.

And now you live dispersed on ribbon roads.

And no man knows or cares who is his neighbor,

Unless his neighbor makes too much disturbance.

And the wind shall say, here were decent Godless people.

Their only monument the asphalt road,

And a thousand lost golf balls.

Can you keep the city that the Lord keeps not with you?

A thousand policemen directing the traffic,

And not tell you why you come, or where you go.

When the stranger says: "What is the meaning of this city?"

Do you huddle close together because you love each other?

What will you answer? We all dwell together,

To make money from each other? Is this a community?

And the stranger will depart and return to the desert.

Oh my soul be prepared for the coming of the stranger.

Be prepared for him who knows how to ask questions.