

## Module 4: Mercy and Justice

*“The spiritual traditions do not deny the reality of the outer world. They simply claim that we help make that world by projecting our spirit on it, for better or worse. . . . Our complicity in world making is a source of awesome and sometimes painful responsibility—and a source of profound hope for change. It is the ground of our common call to leadership, the truth that makes leaders of us all.”*  
Parker Palmer

### Servant Leadership

Many people of faith eagerly lead lives of service, so understanding themselves as servants comes naturally. But ask these same individuals if they see themselves as leaders, and the response of many is a shake of the head; when the correct answer is “yes.” Leadership is a relationship of influence; an opportunity to influence is an opportunity to lead. Each and every day, people of faith have opportunities to engage in servant leadership; and our region desperately needs us to seek, see, and seize these opportunities.

Much has been written about servant leadership, so what we offer here are just a few of the shared characteristics of servant leaders in our region whom we admire. We believe these characteristics reflect an intentional, fundamental decision to orient one’s life beyond self and for others. This other regarding intentionality breeds clarity of purpose and consistency in action.

### Characteristics of Servant Leaders:

The first characteristic is **self-awareness**. Servant leaders recognize that they do not live in isolation, they live in relationship with others—for better or worse—so life is messy and complex but also surprising and joyous. The challenges of this world are not ours to solve alone, even if we could; but we cannot. Servant leaders recognize and acknowledge their limitations. We need others—their differences, their insights, their intellect, their inspirations. Here’s how the author Krista Tippett puts it: “Human relationship—which begins with seeing an ‘other’ as human—is the context in which virtue happens, the context in which character is formed. It is an elemental piece of truth, against which individualistic American culture struggles, that we human beings need others from our first breath—at first to stay alive and in the end to be alive in spirit.” (Speaking of Faith, Krista Tippett)

True self-awareness engenders true humility. And it is in genuine humility that the possibility of servant leadership is borne. **Humility** requires neither self-abasement nor false modesty. Plenty of confident individuals possess a healthy sense of self and are also truly humble. They recognize that their accomplishments have been achieved through the aid of another, often several others. As the ethicist Reinhold Niebuhr put it: “nothing we do, however virtuous, could be accomplished alone; therefore, we must be saved by love.”

If progress is being made in our region on any of the complex challenges that confront us—racial reconciliation, educational equity, transportation, affordable housing, food security, environmental conservation—that progress is being accomplished by servant leaders working in collaboration with those they seek to help and with one another—public officials, corporate citizens, philanthropists, faith leaders, non-profit volunteers. These people are different, sometimes very different. They don’t look alike, think alike, vote alike, worship alike. But they are smart enough to know that what they hold in common is far more important and powerful than their differences; they are intuitive enough to see the value in one another; they are generous enough to express their need for one another; and they are humble enough to find personal satisfaction in the fulfillment of communal ambitions.

Another element of a life lived beyond one’s self and for others is **stewardship**. Exceptional servant leaders are exceptionally effective stewards—of the creation, of the resources entrusted to them. Stewards of relationships; because it is absolutely true that in this 1.3 million “small town” that we call metropolitan Richmond, it is through relationships that stuff gets done, especially the tough stuff.

Servant leaders are stewards of opportunities. Opportunities that they work really, really hard to create and voila, they happen. And then there are those opportunities that come to us in the guise of problems, problems that challenge us to see within them what’s possible and then “to make the possible, the real.”

Seeing possibilities even amidst life’s problems is a discipline, it’s the discipline of **hope**. One can be a cynic and the value of cynics is that they quickly clear away the clutter and see problems for what they are. But that’s just a diagnosis, not a cure. In other words, cynicism doesn’t provide a path

forward. Hope does. Focused, tenacious hope sees clearly, but then says, “even so” and “despite that;” people of hope press on.

As Krista Tippett puts it: “[hope] references reality at every turn and reveres truth. It lives open eyed and wholehearted with the darkness that is woven ineluctably into the light of life and sometimes seems to overcome it. Hope, like every virtue, is a choice that becomes a practice that becomes spiritual muscle memory. It’s a renewable resource for moving through life as it is, not as we wish it to be.” (Becoming Wise: An Inquiry into the Mystery and Art of Living, Krista Tippett)

Servant leaders practice hope, especially when there is little cause for optimism. They model **resiliency** and seek to encourage it in others. And resiliency is essential for any effort that seeks justice through systemic change; because righting centuries of wrong and addressing imbedded inequities—whether these are reflected in unequal schools, inferior housing, disinvested neighborhoods, scarce job opportunities or limited transit—is frustrating, fatiguing, and fraught . . . but worth it nonetheless. “[Resilience] acknowledges from the outset that things will go wrong,” writes Tippett. “We will make messes, and disruption we do not cause or predict will land on us. This is the drama of being alive. To nurture a resilient human being, or a *resilient city*, is to build in an expectation of adversity . . . Resilience honors the unromantic reality of who we are and how we are, and so becomes a refreshingly practical compass for the systems and societies we can craft.” (Becoming Wise, Tippett)

**Faith** enables resilience and hope. Whereas hope is the energy that helps us do the daily work of mercy and justice, faith enables us to get our heads up and look out. Faith is the long view of things; and that’s essential if transformation is our goal. Because transformation takes years, often generations. Faith is clarity of vision and clarity of purpose that breeds consistency of effort. Faith says, “let’s not be distracted, let’s stay the course.” And yet the long view of faith must ultimately be tied back to now, in the words of Reverend King, “the fierce urgency of now.” Now is the time to seek justice; now is the time to envision and then build a Richmond region in which all have the opportunity to thrive. Now is the time for people of faith to serve and lead more broadly and deeply than ever before.

**Facilitator's Note: Pause video for discussion.**

**Discussion Questions:**

- 1. Do these characteristics of servant leadership resonate with you?**
- 2. Can you think of specific examples of when you have acted as a servant leader or you have seen others exercise servant leadership?**
- 3. How can we help one another grow as servant leaders?**

Mercy as an Onramp to Advocacy

Throughout the Richmond region, many of our faith communities excel at mercy—they shelter the homeless, feed the hungry, comfort the sick. But when it comes to seeking justice—systemic change that would mitigate the need for missions of mercy—we often step back or to the side. Perhaps that's because to accomplish systemic change almost always requires engagement in the public sphere, in shaping public policy. And since we live in a society in which all too often partisan politics and public policy are mashed together in an ugly mix, communities of faith turn away from the conversation either due to historical aversions or from fear of creating very real and present divisions within their congregations.

But because we have not brought about systemic changes in public policy and thus ushered in transformation, what should be **occasional** interventions to meet the basic needs of some citizens has become our **normative response** and thus a way of life for thousands of individuals. We are better than that; our neighbors deserve better than that.

If we are willing to feed the hungry, doesn't it make sense to support the elimination of food deserts? If we will work to shelter the homeless, can we not supplant NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) with policies that support the development of affordable housing throughout the region? Jobs that pay well make the ability to afford housing that much more easily accomplished. Since educational opportunities make employment opportunities more likely, should not the faith community have something to say about the state of our schools? If mobility means greater locational, educational, and vocational choice; and

that choice translates into greater opportunity, then shouldn't we want a regional transit system that reaches deeply and dependably into our region?

Food, shelter, health, education, the opportunity for meaningful work, and a way to get from here to there—we hold these needs in common; our efforts to meet them should unite not divide us. And they can, if we resist the temptation to turn away from the public sphere; but instead enter it humbly yet fiercely, willing to use ethical language that names what is at stake—people's lives—and the language of faith that connects us more deeply and richly to our common humanity.

The mandate to love one's neighbor, show mercy, and pursue justice is shared across faith traditions. To seek to meet human need is to love God; it is to mirror the mercy, compassion, and justice we identify as belonging to God. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is asked which is the greatest commandment; and he responds by quoting the Hebrew scriptures: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" To live in right relationship with our God, requires that we live in right relationships with our neighbors. The Qur'an expresses it in this way: "Worship Allah and join none with Him; and do good to parents, kinsfolk, orphans, the poor, the neighbor who is near of kin, the neighbor who is a stranger, the companion by your side, the wayfarer you meet."(4:36) And from the prophet Micah we hear: "And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."(6:8)

For people of faith in twenty-first century metropolitan Richmond, love of neighbor cannot be relegated to private actions; mercy alone is insufficient. Love of neighbor requires the pursuit of justice; and the path to justice runs through public policy. Robert Lupton, author of *Toxic Charity*, suggests that for our engagement to be beneficial, we must hold mercy and justice together: "Mercy is a force that compels us to acts of compassion. Mercy is a door, an opening, an invitation to touch a life, to make a difference. But it is not a destination." When held together, mercy and justice "lead us to holistic involvement. Divorced, they become deformed. Mercy without justice degenerates into dependency and entitlement, preserving the power of the

giver over the recipient. Justice without mercy is cold and impersonal, more concerned about rights than relationships. . . . Mercy combined with justice creates: immediate care with a future plan; emergency relief and responsible development; short-term intervention and long-term involvement; heart responses and engaged minds.”

When we insist on both mercy and justice, we follow in the footsteps of our faith ancestors; more importantly, we prove faithful to our god. And as grace would have it, our own faith is enriched.

### Advocacy Enables Spiritual Growth

Advocating for systemic change that transforms the lives of our neighbors and our communities is a faithful and fitting response to the injustices and iniquities in our world. If we want the “beloved community” to be our reality, we have to be willing to work for it. When we engage in acts of service, more often than not we feel physically energized, emotionally uplifted, and spiritually enriched; the same can hold true for advocacy.

But how we go about the business of advocacy matters. We would never want to be guilty of the old saying “what you do speaks so loudly, I can’t hear what you say.” Respectful encounters and civil civic discourse should be the touchstones of our efforts.

When seeking to influence public policy, consider the following steps.

*Learn . . .*

While the opportunities to weigh in on policy debates (which are fundamentally discussions of our values) are many and come at us with great frequency and urgency, if we attempt to advocate without first understanding the issues, we’re simply adding to the noise.

So the first step in faithful advocacy is to seek to understand the substance of an issue as well as differing opinions. In the Richmond region, numerous groups have collected data and conducted studies on several fronts—poverty, transportation, affordable housing, food insecurity, educational inequities, senior access to health care and other services, etc. Often these advocacy organizations and nonprofits welcome the opportunity

to speak to groups. So read the reports, host speakers, and create opportunities for conversations among your communicants.

*Listen . . .*

The first step in loving our neighbors is to be still, be quiet, and listen to our neighbors, allowing them to express their wants, needs, aspirations. But it's hard to listen to people, if you're not in the same room with them. If a faith community wants to understand the perspectives of those they seek to help as well as the perspectives of those who may disagree with a proposed policy, e.g., expansion of transit or the construction of affordable housing, then it's incumbent upon the faithful to create safe spaces for candid conversation and active listening.

*Pray . . .*

The act of prayer can take on many forms and meanings, but certainly one element of prayer is that it bespeaks the discipline of humility. At its most basic, prayer is an acknowledgment of our limits. There's something comforting in that. Prayer is not abdication—it's all in god's hands—but rather an acknowledgement that while our agency may be limited, it can prove powerful and productive. We can pray for guidance, for patience, for persistence; we can pray for the grace to live respectfully with our differences, and for forgiveness when we fail to do so.

*Vote . . .*

Voting matters. While hundreds of Richmond area residents promote public policies that will further justice and equity, at the end of the day, it's the elected officials whose votes block or enact such policies.

*Act . . .*

“I prayed for freedom for twenty years,” wrote Frederick Douglas. “But I received no answer until I prayed with my legs.” Advocacy requires that we act. When some folks hear the word “advocacy” they might think of hired lobbyists who walk the halls of the General Assembly or testify before City Council. They may think of community organizers who encourage demonstrations of support or opposition. While these elements are part and

parcel of our political process, equally important are smaller gestures—writing a letter, making a phone call, sending a well-timed text. It’s important that the appointed and elected officials hear from members of faith communities.

Become a YIMBY—Yes, In My Back Yard, in other words, support the development of affordable housing throughout the region. You can register this support by contacting elected officials directly or by offering comments during the public comment segment of each meeting of the Boards of Supervisors or City Council. The Pulse, the region’s Bus Rapid Transit system, represents one of the most significant investments of public dollars into the region in decades. In addition to BRT, Henrico is expanding its bus routes and hours of service—a clear effort to more effectively and efficiently connect people, housing, and jobs. But for the expanded bus routes to remain in operation, they need riders. We can be those riders—the most tangible way to advocate for transit is to use it.

### *Be in Relationship . . .*

Like everything else in life, public policy is accomplished through relationships. And just as relationships in our private life require time and attention, so do the relationships with elected and appointed officials. Because they recognize the power of the pulpit, many public officials welcome the opportunity to hear from and speak to communities of faith. Within the Richmond region, the overwhelming majority of these officials can and do put partisan politics to the side when addressing pressing priorities such as housing, workforce development, food deserts, etc.

It’s equally important that people of faith seek to be in relationship with one another. Faith communities and inter-faith dialogues should be safe spaces in which honest, uncomfortable conversations about race, class, inequities, injustice can be held. In finding the courage to be vulnerable with one another, we will strengthen the authenticity and effectiveness of our witness. If we are to transform this regional community we love into the *beloved* community, we must do mercy and seek justice. Let’s get to work.

### **Discussion Questions:**

- 1. What steps must our community of faith take to move from mercy to advocacy?**
- 2. What are the policy issues that we want to learn more about?**
- 3. What are some specific ways that our faith community can show its support for these causes?**