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Driving along I-80/90 has become a lot easier since I purchased an E-ZPass, that little electronic box that sits inside my front windshield of my truck. As I drive through a toll area, it automatically approves my entrance onto the toll road, tracks me through the toll booths so I no longer have to check for change to pay the toll or swipe my credit card, and then automatically charges me after I exit for the distance I traveled on the road. Having a pass makes driving along the route in Northern Indiana and around Chicago a lot easier, especially when I drive to visit my daughter in the St. Louis area.

Wouldn't it be nice if we had a similar pass for other things in life, such as waiting in line at the grocery store when everyone seems to have the same shopping day as you do? As you push your shopping cart through the line, the cart is automatically scanned as you head for the car, never having to stop to pull out the items. Imagine having an E-ZPass in church, so that when you enter the sanctuary, your offering is automatically collected. I'm sure the stewardship committee would love that idea.

It seems as though two of Jesus' disciples, James and John, were hoping for an E-ZPass as they asked Jesus for special seats in heaven next to him. "How about we sit at your right and left hands, right next to you, so that everyone will know how important we are?"

It's not hard to imagine asking such a question, is it, for we all like privileges. We all like to be special. We all like shortcuts.

Right before this request of James and John, Jesus had already tried to explain the difficulty of being first in line and how difficult the path ahead would be, and he told them that he would be killed. When Jesus heard his disciples arguing about who was the greatest among them, he pointed to a child as an example of how to follow him and suggested that the first will be last.

When someone asked Jesus about how to have eternal life, he suggested the rich man asking the question sell everything. Then, Jesus once again suggested how he would die. After hearing about these challenges, James and John made their request to sit next to him in heaven, so Jesus replied, "You don't

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know what you're asking! Can you drink the cup I drink or receive the baptism I receive?"<sup>1</sup>

They quickly answered, "Sure we can," not realizing the cup would be suffering and the baptism an entrance into death and new life, that two thieves would be at the right and left hands of Jesus as they hung on a cross. There was no way James and John could follow this particular path, and yet, they somehow thought they could bargain their way into special seats in heaven.

When the other disciples caught wind of their request, they became angry, probably wanting in on the deal James and John were trying to make about getting the best seats in heaven. Jesus replied that to be first, they must become servants, for he had come not to be served but to serve others.

I imagine hearing Jesus speak about becoming a servant seemed like upside-down advice, along with his previous words about the first becoming last. Maybe they wondered if they had wandered into opposite day, where everything was backwards, as though wearing your clothes inside-out.

Albert Schweitzer, the missionary doctor to Africa, once said, "Life becomes harder for us when we live for others, but it also becomes richer and happier."<sup>2</sup> More upside-down words, for they seem to go against the me-first attitude that permeates our culture. Who wants to travel the difficult path of caring for others? Can't we get an E-ZPass to happiness without concern for others?

When retired U.S. Air Force major general William Cohen wrote a book on leadership skills for business, one might imagine he would use his military background as a model for running a company with a power-and-control approach without concern for others. Interestingly he wrote,

My research debunks the myth that many people seem to have that you become a leader by fighting your way to the top. Rather, you become a leader by helping others to the top.

Helping your employees is as important, and many times more so, than trying to get the most work out of them.<sup>3</sup>

More words that sound upside-down and inside-out, echoing the seemingly backward suggestion that Jesus made to his disciples. They wanted an E-ZPass

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into heaven, without struggle, without serving others, without any traffic snarls and tied up delays. Their hopes were an illusion, just as the picture on the bulletin is an illusion—cars driving out of a cell phone onto the road.

Sometimes it's not always clear who's the leader, for good leaders may work in the background, encouraging everyone to share their gifts. In a congregation, leaders and followers engage in a dance, back and forth, swaying with the music. It's a bit like the National Weather Service and the chief of the Cree people discovered one year.

The Cree people asked their chief in the autumn if the winter was going to be cold. Not really knowing an answer, the Cree chief replied that the winter was going to be cold and that the members of the village were to collect wood to be prepared.

Being a good leader, he then went to the nearest phone booth and called the National Weather Service and asked, "Is this winter going to be cold?"

The man on the phone responded, "This winter is going to be quite cold indeed."

So the chief went back to speed up his people to collect even more wood to be prepared. A week later he called the National Weather Service again and asked, "Is it going to be a very cold winter?"

"Yes," the man replied, "it's going to be a very cold winter."

So the chief went back to his people and ordered them to go and find every scrap of wood they could find. Two weeks later he called the National Weather Service again: "Are you absolutely sure the winter is going to be very cold?"

"Absolutely," the man replied, "the Cree are collecting wood like crazy."<sup>4</sup>

If you're preparing for winter or searching for an E-ZPass to sit next to Jesus, remember that he welcomes everyone to sit near him, even without shortcuts. He invites us to join the dance of serving one another. We're all invited to lead the way and follow the Way of Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 10:38, CEB.

<sup>2</sup> Men of Integrity, March-April 2003, as quoted on HomileticsOnline, 10/19/03.

<sup>3</sup> *The Stuff of Heroes: The Eight Universal Laws of Leadership*, as quoted in *Leadership Rising: Raise Your Awareness, Raise Your Leadership, Raise Your Life*, by John F. Antal, 2021, p. 115.

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<sup>4</sup> Hodgins, Michael. *1002 Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, Compelling Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers*. Zondervan. Kindle Edition, #151.