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Leading with Timeless Values in Turbulent Times (East Lansing, MI)

C. William Pollard

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**Michigan Prayer Breakfast
East Lansing, MI
June 13, 2007**

C. William Pollard

“Leading With Timeless Values in Turbulent Times”

I am delighted to be with you today at your prayer breakfast and share some thoughts about leading with a source of strength and direction in changing and often turbulent times.

We live in a world of accelerated change and choice. We are flooded with choices about how we will live, how we will spend our time, what we will buy and where we will go on that next vacation. As we make these choices on an individual basis, those of us in business also realize that the continuing forces of globalization are changing the supply and demand factors in our markets, resulting in more opportunities but also more volatility and less predictability. In business, change has become a way of life and the risk factors have increased.

Although I am now retired from active involvement with ServiceMaster, I have felt the effect of some of the change that is currently going on in our Company. Management recently announced that our Company would be acquired by a private equity firm. One thing certain about tomorrow for our people is that it will be different from today.

It was Dickens who said “It is the best of times and the worst of times”. Although he wrote this years ago about the tale of two cities, he may well have been writing it about the world we live in today.

Now there is much about what is occurring around us that is exciting and pregnant with opportunity.

As Americans, while we have problems, we also have been blessed and there is reason to be thankful. We live in the most sophisticated and advanced culture that history has ever known. We have all the modern conveniences at our fingertips. We live very well in comparison to most of the rest of the world.

I have been reminded of this reality as I have traveled to Southeast Asia, and more recently to Africa, including places like Kenya, northern Uganda and southern Sudan. As I listened and shared with people who were not only less fortunate than I was but were without some of the basics of life; like food in their stomachs, clothes on their backs, a roof over their heads, and safety for their children, I sensed that there was still a spark of hope. Many of them, with a little help from the outside, were working hard to help themselves and improve their life as well as the lives of others.

All of what we have in economic well-being in this country has not done much, however, to resolve issues of fear, conflict, and despair. Nor do we have many answers or

solutions for the epidemic of terrorism or the acts of violence that can erupt and explode at any time in our schools, homes or places of work.

While we have made great gains over the last 100 years in areas like life expectancy, health, education, and growth in real income, we have failed to develop anything comparable in the area of growth in moral behavior or the reduction of violence.

Robert Fogel, an economist from the University of Chicago and a 1993 Nobel Prize winner, recently authored a book entitled *The Fourth Great Awakening*, in which he traced the history of religious faith in America from pre-Revolutionary War times to the present.

As he analyzed the effect of religious faith upon the development of the American society and economy, he concluded that the biggest issue today in our culture was not the lack of employment opportunities or even the distribution of economic resources. Nor, in his judgment, was it a lack of diversity or equal opportunity.

In his opinion, the major issue in our country was simply a lack of the distribution of what he referred to as spiritual resources or spiritual assets. There was, he concluded, 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 complexity of ethical issues, it will have to acquire more “spiritual capital”.

The lesson from his study is simple and yet profound. The health and welfare of people cannot be understood or measured solely in terms of their economic or physical needs. Nor can it be measured solely by their intellectual or educational accomplishments. There also is a spiritual dimension to the human condition. It is this spiritual dimension that influences moral behavior and the development of character and can be the genesis of love, not hate; good, not evil.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, in his classic work, *Gulag Archipelago*, recognized that a line between good and evil passes through every human heart. He suggested that even within hearts overwhelmed by evil there was one small bridgehead of good, and even in the best of hearts, there remained a small corner of evil. His conclusion was that it was impossible to expel evil from the world in its entirety, but it was possible to recognize it and constrain it. For Solzhenitsyn, the source of truth and ultimate constraint came from God, an authority beyond himself.

But if God is a source of truth and the constraint of evil, how do we explain the hatred and use of violence by some in the name of God? Can God be on their side?

This was the dilemma that Abraham Lincoln faced over 145 years ago as he headed into a Civil War with both sides praying for victory and claiming God was on their side. Lincoln determined that the real issue for him was not whether God was on his side, but whether he was on God's side and further how would his actions and leadership

reflect the true nature of God? A God who created every person in His likeness and image with dignity and worth and the right to be free. A God of love who wanted a relationship with the people He so created.

It is this same God that we take time to pray to today. As we do so, we raise the question of whether we are on His side.

C.S. Lewis, the famous author and Oxford Dean, concluded that the question of God was the most important question in life. His response took him from the emptiness and despair of atheism to the joy and fulfillment of knowing God and being accepted by Him.

As we reflect upon some of the uncertainties of life, I am reminded of a talk that Lewis gave to the first year students arriving at Oxford University in the fall of 1939. The title of his talk was “Living and Learning in a Time of War”. Now as you think back to that period of history, it was also a time of great uncertainty. Germany had invaded and conquered Poland in a matter of weeks. Both France and the United Kingdom had declared war against Germany but were ill-prepared for war. And America had stated that it would stay out of the war. Germany’s military strength was growing and the Blitzkrieg was a reality.

In such a world, why were these students coming to learn the classics at Oxford University? What did Plato, Aristotle, or Shakespeare have to do with current events? As

he posed these questions, he reminded the students that the presence of evil and the violence of war really didn't change anything. All it did was to aggravate reality, the reality that there is much about our life that is not in our control. We didn't control when or where we came into this world. No one really knows when they will die or what calamity may be ahead of them in their personal lives. Life at best, he concluded, was always uncertain. But he also pointed out that there were some things that were within their control: the daily choices of Life, the daily choices as they had to go about the business of learning.

As Lewis concluded his talk, he paused for a moment and then emphasized to the students that as they faced the reality of uncertainty, and realized all of what was not in their control, they should take time to reflect upon who is ultimately in control and what was their relationship to Him. Death was not the end of existence, he said. There was a God to face and the ultimate question before them was whether they would make a choice for Him and be on God's side when that day of reckoning would come?

Now many of us who are here today are business people. We know what it means to succeed or fail in serving customers, making money and creating wealth. But where does God fit into this picture? Do God and profit mix?

As I have now retired from my leadership and CEO responsibilities at ServiceMaster, and look back at the 25 years that I served, I can add up the numbers that show growth in profits, customers served, and a compounded return for our shareholders

that on average was 20% per year. While these figures are part of a normal business assessment of performance, the conclusion for me cannot be limited to these money or value-creation measurements. The real and lasting measurement is whether the results of my leadership can be seen in the changed lives of people I led.

Our corporate objectives at ServiceMaster 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.

In a diverse and pluralistic society, some may question whether the first objective, to honor God, belongs as part of a purpose statement of a business or for that matter in our case of a public company. But regardless of your starting point, the principle that may be embraced by all is simply where it led us and that was to honor and recognize the dignity and worth of every person and our responsibility to be involved in not only what the person is doing in their work but also who they were becoming. The challenges and opportunities of running a business with these objectives are discussed in my recent book entitled *Serving Two Masters? Reflections on God and Profit*, copies of which will be available to you today.

Frankly, when you view people as only production units or something that can be defined solely in economic terms, you lose sight of their real value and worth.

It was Henry Ford who was quoted as saying, “Why is it I always get the whole person when all I really wanted was a pair of hands?”. But it is the whole person who comes to work every day. Someone who deserves to be treated as the subject of work, not the object of work. Someone who, as part of being human, also has a spiritual dimension.

Now, for me as a Christian and one who seeks to be a follower of Jesus Christ, one of the best ways I found to share my faith and lead in the marketplace, was to seek to serve as I led and to reflect the principle that Jesus taught His disciples as he washed their feet, namely 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 and believed could be measured by what I did. My ethic and faith became a reality as my words were backed up by my actions as a person of faith. I could not leave my faith in the pew on Sunday. It was part of who I was at work on Monday.

My faith has involved a transaction, a transaction not with a customer or shareholder, but with God. A transaction that involved a change of direction in my life.

It was now almost 60 years ago as a young boy by my mother’s knee that I sought to learn from her what must be done to have a right relationship with God. Although young and unsophisticated, I was able to make a choice to take that first step of faith, to turn to God, and accept his offer of forgiveness and acceptance. It was my spiritual rebirth, the beginning of my understanding and knowing God.

It was a choice that has affected the way I have lived and my relationship with others, including my wife of now over 45 years, my family of 4 children and now 15 grandchildren, and, my colleagues in business and my friends.

Yes, there have been times of doubt and despair, especially during those difficult teenage years and the sudden death of my father when I was 18. There followed the challenges of college and law school and seeking to establish a home, support a family, and develop my profession. There were also those feelings of inadequacy and concern about whether I would measure up.

There was a drive for success, which allowed my law profession to become a jealous mistress in my life, only to be stopped by God's intervention with a serious health condition. This was followed by a dramatic change in my life, which involved leaving the practice of law and going to serve as an administrator and faculty member at Wheaton College. It was during this phase in my life that God began to teach me lessons of balance and spiritual maturity.

In 1977, my path took another turn, when I left Wheaton and joined the leadership team at ServiceMaster. Over the next 25 years, there were many changes and choices to make as we grew the business. For most of this time, we were doubling in size every 3.5 to 4 years. As I retired from the Firm in 2001, we were employing or managing over 250,000 people and our services stretched from Karachi, Pakistan to Tokyo, Japan.

So you see, my life has not been a simple, logical or predictable sequence of events. God has chosen many different people and circumstances to break, mold and develop me. The most exciting thing about the process is that it is continuing. There are not always answers to every question, but as this transaction with God is further implemented, I am learning about what it means to have a growing relationship with Him, to know His forgiveness for my mistakes, to understand how to spend my life for Him in the lives of others, to realize God's ownership of who I am and what I have, and my responsibility to be a steward of all that he has given me.

This transaction with God has been the most important decision of my life. God's offer is not limited to any one person or any one group. It is available to all. To complete the deal, requires a saying of yes to God, a conscious decision to be on God's side. A God Who hears our prayers and wants a relationship with us.

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June 5, 2007