

Leading by Serving

Few today know much about our 22nd and 24th president, Grover Cleveland. He was financially conservative in some areas while liberal in others. He was praised for his honesty, self-reliance and integrity. While not popular at the end of his second term, he is now recognized as a strong leader with high morals plus the courage to defy strict party boundaries.

I am sharing a story which is largely unknown, but demonstrates Cleveland's honorable character, surprisingly, by a carefully orchestrated presidential cover-up. History buff, Rick Beyer, related this story in his fascinating book, *The Greatest Presidential Stories Never Told*.

In May 1893 when Cleveland noticed a rough spot in the roof of his mouth, he consulted his physician who discovered a cancerous growth about the size of a quarter. The doctor recommended it be removed immediately. At the time the U.S. was experiencing financial difficulties; more than 200 banks had recently failed. The president's advisors believed news of his illness would make a bad situation worse. Beyer described what happened next, "*So the president, who had made candor his watchword— the man known as 'Grover the Good'— launched a massive cover-up.*"

The press was told President Cleveland was going on a pleasure cruise, though in reality a surgical team of five doctors was secretly assembled on a private yacht anchored in New York City. Shortly after the *Oneida* pulled away from the pier, the patient was anesthetized and the tumor carefully removed. The medical team extracted two teeth and most of his upper left jaw. They implanted an artificial jaw made of vulcanized rubber and were careful to leave no scars which the press might see. The surgery was over by the time the yacht landed in Cape Cod. The president recovered there and the press told it was just a vacation and that he was recovering from having two teeth pulled. The actual story of what happened remained a secret for nearly 40 years, 25 years after Cleveland's death.

I am not encouraging dishonesty; but the president's motivation was pure. He wanted to keep innocent people from being hurt by his illness. Jesus spoke about this kind of attitude when he said, "*You know that the rulers in this world lord it over their people, and officials flaunt their authority over those under them. But among you it will be different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant.*" (Matthew 20:25-26, NLT)

While a hospital operating room would have been much safer, Cleveland opted for surgery on a moving boat. Exactly how each of us serves others will be unique, but our 24th president showed what great leadership looks like; serving others, even when it was neither easy nor convenient. Jesus, arguably history's greatest leader, made the point that great leaders lead by serving. On some level we all lead. Some of us can be great leaders. The question is whom will you lead by serving this week?