

Leading the Church

Acts 14:21-23

The Nature and Purpose of the Church - Studies in Acts

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Sunday, June 15, 2008

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

As the choir has led us, we recognize today that Father's Day is the day we look to people in our lives who have led us—whether it be fathers of the church, fathers of our families, fathers of institutions. We look to people who have been examples of what it means to live lives of leadership, with integrity and courage. This passage in Acts chapter 14 is about the apostles and the core of their leadership pattern as they passed it on to the next generation of elders. We recognize that during this time also, we are in the nomination process for officers for this church. And there is a sense in which the nominating process of the PC(USA) — Presbyterian Church (USA)— is an extension of the apostolic leadership pattern of picking officers. It is in the hands of those who, with discernment and care, listen to the congregation and nominate officers. So with all of that in mind, let us come now to God in prayer, to hear the word about leadership that God would speak to us today. Let us pray. Our Lord Jesus Christ, through the power of your Almighty Father and the community of your Holy Spirit, now speak to us, that we might be transformed by the grace that you give to us through faith in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

The apostles— the primary leaders of the church— strengthened the souls of the disciples and encouraged them to continue in faith, saying, that it is through many points of suffering that we must enter the kingdom of God. And after that, they appointed elders and entrusted these elders, in prayer and fasting, to God. This is the heart of leadership, as modeled by the apostles, for how we should lead— not only in the church, but in our families, and in our organizations and communities. To strengthen the souls of those who follow us; to encourage them to continue trusting in God and trusting in those who lead; and to tell them the truth about life— that life is full of pressure and pain, but God is with you in the midst. And then finally, after instruction, encouragement, and preparation, to turn them loose— to let go of them, and put them in the hands of God— for them to lead the next generation.

The four key phrases, here, for leadership, are simply: 1. to strengthen the followers; 2. to come alongside the followers; 3. to anticipate suffering as a way of God, and a way to God; and 4. entrust the leaders, finally, to God's hand. They strengthened the soul of those who followed Jesus Christ; they were their "life trainers." They strengthened their souls by developing their inner fortitude; enlarging their understanding of who God is; expanding their thinking about Christ; empowering them to lead out of their ability to follow; to train them in discipline; coach them in best practices for life; instruct them in the knowledge of Jesus Christ; to teach them how to live well; but then finally, to know how to lead well.

After years of strengthening the inner life of his son, Earl Woods said to Tiger: "You will never encounter another person with more mental toughness than yourself" (an amazing thing for a father to say to a son.) And how did this happen? It's because Earl spent hours and days (his life) pouring into Tiger— not about golf, but about the importance of being a person of focus and integrity; to be a person of character. And that created in Tiger Woods a toughness of presence, as well as a gentleness of spirit. How is this strength of soul developed? It's developed by the modeling of people who show us the way, by seeing their discipline and participating in the disciplines that prepare us to be these kinds of people— to be involved with a practice of commitment to life in the context of love.

We know, however, that the same soul can be weakened. What does a weakened and abused soul look like? One that's constantly worn out by negativity and criticism; discouragement; a tendency towards seeing life on the 'doom-and-gloom' side; probably developing a critical spirit; or a sense of being a victim; passive; maybe aggressive; or passive-aggressive— leading to the opposite of leadership. Those who lead us and model life for us can lead us to the positive side of discipleship... or to the dark side of discipleship. And parents are at the key place in leadership in children's lives to lead either direction.

What does it mean to strengthen a soul? To help them be realistic and hopeful; to be focused in what is essential and crucial to life; attentive to that which is important; encouraging to others; disciplined and self-controlled. This is what the apostles invested their lives doing for those who followed Jesus.

In this church's history, as we will celebrate a little bit later in this service, the first pastor of The National Presbyterian Church, the Reverend Dr. Edward L. R. Elson (pastor from 1946 to 1973) tells a story; actually he tells several of them in his book about being the pastor to the President at that time, Dwight Eisenhower. In January of 1954 he preached a sermon entitled "Mastery of Moods." It was on 2 Corinthians chapter 5 and the phrase, "the love of Christ controls us." In that sermon he dealt with what it meant to have an uncontrolled temper: a person who is more committed to criticism than compliment; to have undisciplined emotion; and how the love of Christ constrains people to be different than that. Christ is an antidote and a healer to people who have poor emotional patterns. He [Elson] would say in that sermon: "self-mastery is not enough; only Christ's mastery is sufficient."

Following the sermon, as he was meeting people outside, President Eisenhower went past him and he said to him at that moment, "I would like 50 written copies of that sermon, Dr. Elson" (as he felt like a number of his colleagues on the Hill and the White House would benefit from reading it.) So he sent it out to those members— some military officers, some in the Cabinet. And it was the reflection of Dr. Elson that maybe Dwight Eisenhower had a sense that there were other people in the government who had a hard time controlling their anger and a tendency to be negative in their criticism. We don't relate to that in today's Washington, DC, do we? He [Elson] was strengthening the souls of the leaders in the church. He was helping them to see life from Jesus' perspective and to understand how to live life from an apostolic position of fatherhood.

A second perspective that the leaders of the early church gave to their disciples was to be a cheerleader and an advocate—a paraclete, someone who comes alongside someone else to give them consolation when they are in pain; to give them comfort and help; to intercede for them and to be their advocate in trouble. But to encourage them when life is tough; to encourage them, in fact, to continue in faith and not to give up, when they are confronted with the terrible circumstances of life— because we know that people who follow can become discouraged when life becomes difficult.

Life can be tough. In their best-selling book, *The Leadership Challenge*, James Kouzes and Barry Posner name five practices of exemplary leadership. The fifth practice is one they call "encourage the hearts of your followers." They describe how good leaders encourage those who follow them as they expect the best from them. They personalize recognition and know them by name. They find out what each individual needs in his or her life to encourage them. They visit with them personally; they invite them to tell their stories, both positively and negatively. And they recognize their contributions in the family; or in the church; or in the community; or in the organization. They create a sense of community— 'we are in this together.' 'You are not alone.' 'I'm not a leader apart from you; I am a leader alongside of you.' Friends can be good medicine, they say, particularly during high times of stress.

I believe the Book of Acts gives us a number of examples of high times of stress. In fact, I believe that's why the apostles were very intentional about talking to the disciples about what it means to deal with pain and suffering; for the apostles dealt with it regularly. Just before this passage, if you look a little earlier in Acts, you will see that the apostle Paul and Barnabas are in Lystra; they are preaching the Gospel of Jesus. And in resistance to that, there is a group of people who threaten them and finally take Paul out to stone him. I don't know what it was, but Paul was the one that always got stoned; Barnabas never seemed to get stoned. I'm not sure why that happened. But Paul is beaten to an inch of his life and they leave him for dead. It is when the disciples come out of Lystra and gather around him that something evidently miraculous happens, because Paul gets up and walks and goes traveling the next day to the next city. It's because Paul has been an encouraging presence amidst the disciples that the disciples gather around him; and they evidently pray for him; and, for all intents and purposes, raise him from the dead.

Leaders tell their followers to anticipate suffering because they've been through it. Acts is a book about God's faithfulness in the troubled times. And that word "suffering" is about pressure; it's about stress. We know that life is full of pressure and stress— the times when things just seem to push in on us; press us in ways that we're not quite prepared to deal with them. Anguish and intensity... a sense of being under

siege... or a whole cluster of events that seem to come upon us as if there's a plan to do us in. And the apostles say: plan on it. In fact, that's the way through to the kingdom of God, because God will become most real to you when the time is tough. It's an act of leadership to let people know that that's the truth.

There are some Christian leaders today who would rather let you think that, if you are a person of faith, you will not go through trouble. You can lead a charmed life; if you're faithful you will be trouble-free. In fact, some would even say: if you have trouble in your life it's an obvious lack of faith that is driving that. But the reality is, according to apostolic leadership, and according to any leader who's got their head screwed on straight, there is pressure in life that will try to do you in. But a faithful God, in Jesus Christ, as Jesus himself modeled, will bring us through those painful, threatening times.

Out here on a wall that was dedicated when Dr. Elson retired from this church as the senior pastor... the wall contains the words of Philippians, chapter two, verses five to 11. It is that passage about Jesus, who was willing to be humbled to the point of death, even death on a cross. And it is because of that that God raised him from the dead and put him at the right hand of the Father. As if to say to Dr. Elson: We know that part of what's gone on here at the National Presbyterian Church is that you, as a pastor, have shown us the way to live through suffering and pain. You've strengthened us and you've encouraged us along life's tough way.

When the apostles had selected and trained those that they knew would be the next generation of leaders, they did another hard thing: they commended them to God in prayer and fasting. Now that we've picked them; now that we've trained them; now that we've prepared them and we've shared what we can about life with them, it's time to let them go, and let God lead them. That's a tough thing for a parent to do with their children. It's a tough thing for people in the church to do with those who've been discipled. It's a tough thing for organizations to do with the next generation of leaders— to finally let go of control; to turn them loose and to say, 'You're in charge now. You lead us.' It's a great act of leadership and of affirmation that there's a greater power that's going to guide these leaders as they lead the organization, the church, and the family, in the future.

This past Friday, we lost one of our great leaders in America—our next-door neighbor at NBC Channel 4, Tim Russert. Tim Russert was an example of a person who daily and constantly, moment-by-moment strengthened souls and encouraged trust in God and trust in good leadership. Time magazine recently recognized Russert as one of the 100 Most Influential People in the World. As moderator of "Meet the Press" and the Bureau Chief for NBC News in Washington, people said that Russert was the most astute, discerning, relentless pursuer of truth that they had in the department. Well-prepared; driven but gentle; had a genuineness of humanity; and was easy to like and admire. He was the son of Big Russ, the father of Luke, and the husband of Maureen. His leadership was not just defined by his organizational clout. His leadership was defined basically by his humanity, and how he was a person in the midst of his work.

He wrote books on father's: *Big Russ and Me* and the second book, *Wisdom of Our Fathers*. He understood fathers as leaders—leaders who were to lead the next generation of their sons and daughters, to discover everything of value that they might share, and model, and instill in them— by strengthening their souls and giving them encouragement to continue through the hard times. It was in the writing of his book, *Big Russ and Me*, that his own father found the strength to finally say to his son, Tim: "I love you." The book gave him permission. The book also gave permission for the son, Luke, to say some things to his father that he might not have otherwise said. Russert tells this one story about that instance. It was about a month after the father had said, "I love you," that they had come home from a midnight Mass. The son had just taken a shower; he came out and he just had a towel wrapped around him. His mother gasped; for as he raised his arms she saw a tattoo under his right shoulder. They had been very careful in instructing their son never to put tattoos on; they were pretty upset that suddenly one had appeared. And in the middle of the passionate, angry conversation, they finally backed off and let the son present his case. The son said, "After I read your book, Dad, I wanted you and Grandpa to be with me always at my side." And when he raised his left arm, there were the letters "TJR"— which were the initials for both his father, and himself, and his grandfather. And in that moment, Luke was saying to his Dad: "I want to know that you are always beside me. You have been the one to stand with me in all situations. You have had my back when life was tough, and I want a constant reminder that you are there, no matter what." It was in that context that Tim Russert collapsed completely and sobbed, and realized that his own son was

telling them how much leadership and love had meant to him.

Tim Russert loved the music of Bruce Springsteen; as a background to one of the television presentations on his life and the value of it, they played the words of this Springsteen song, as if it was a prayer: "May your strength give us strength. May your faith give us faith. May your hope give us hope. May your love and give us love." As if to be a double entendre— 'not just you, Tim Russert, in your absence— but you, as also a person of faith, and the Lord that you worship—may that God that was with you, be with us.' That's the essence of leadership—from the apostles to the next generation of the church: to strengthen the souls of the disciples; to encourage them to go through the hard times and know that God is with them; to help them understand that life is going to be full of struggles, and suffering, and pain; and to finally entrust them to God as they left. I can't help but believe that Tim Russert, in his death and departure, had prayed many times to entrust his son... and his wife... and his friends... and his work... into the hands of Almighty God, before he left.

What are we doing with our leadership today— in our families; in our church; in our organizations; in our groups where we manage, where we supervise? Are we encouraging people's hearts? Are we strengthening their souls? Are we being a human being in their presence so they feel the love of our humanity through Jesus Christ to them? Those are the leadership questions for us to embrace because of who Jesus Christ is— who loves us and laid down his life for us. Let us pray. O gracious God, we now put our lives in your hands... our children in your hands... our church officers in your hands... the organizational employees in your hands... because we are willing to put ourselves out there as servant-leaders, who strengthen them in your grace and mercy, through Jesus Christ. And so we commend them to you, as we commend ourselves to your leadership, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.