

FOLLOWING THE LEADER
ISAIAH 49:1-7; JOHN 1:29-42
JANUARY 16, 2005, MLK, JR. WEEKEND
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It's Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend. Next Sunday we ordain and install newly elected elders and deacons. The week after that our Scripture lessons introduce to us Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and his vision for a new way of living and relating to one another.

Each of these weeks is about leadership. Remembering and celebrating a great leader of civil and human rights, asking God's blessing upon the leaders of this congregation, and Jesus offering us a way of living called "servant leadership."

At the men's retreat in February we will explore the role of leadership at home and work. What does it mean to be a leader as a husband, father, manager, colleague? Leadership is a difficult word to pin down. But it is something, like so many other things in life, we know when we see.

I want to make two points today. The first is that the kind of leadership I will be talking about over these three weeks is leadership that starts from within. Let me illustrate. A few years ago I heard a story, that inspires me still, of an affluent Connecticut wife and mother. There was no need for her to work outside of the home – which was maintained by a staff of servants. She had never "worked" in that sense in her life.

Then she realized one day something was holding her back. She had a deep fear of going outside of the home to work; a feeling of anxiety and paralysis. When she identified that dark fear she realized she had a choice for life or death. So she made a decision to find a job – any job at first. And she did.

Used to a life of comfort and ease she was now out of the house early in the morning and home sometimes late at night making her way in the world with millions of others. Her entire demeanor changed. She became more confident and fun, somehow more authentic. Her son, who today, is Director of Admissions for a New England boarding school says it was seeing his mother tackle her deep fear that turned him around. At a time, he said, when our family was struggling and I was headed for disaster, my mother's facing her demons helped me face mine.

Leadership from within. Leadership with integrity. Leadership by going down into the dark place of the soul. When someone has made that journey you know it. Like that middle-aged mother in Connecticut you can see and hear it in their eyes and voice, the way they carry themselves. There is an aura of authenticity about such persons.

John tells us Jesus was such a leader. He taught as one with authority, the Gospel says, which is another way of saying the same thing. In today's story John the Baptist, the two disciples and Peter were able to see in Jesus' eyes and hear in his voice someone who had gone to the dark place and confronted his demons.

In a few weeks we will recount the story of Jesus entering the wilderness and how he came out of it clear about his purpose and direction. That was his crucible experience. The gift of which was a sense of direction, clarity and confidence about his relationship to God and the world.

Many of us have been reading and talking about Parker Palmer here at Westminster. Palmer is director of the Pendle Hill Retreat and Renewal Center. He is a Quaker. He is someone who has made the journey to the dark places in his own soul.

Palmer says this, he says, “great leadership comes from people who have made that downward journey through violence and terror, who have touched the deep place where we are in community with each other, and who can help take other people to that place. That is what great leadership is all about.”

There are many aspects of leadership. But Palmer’s definition is especially relevant to the church and our time because it has more to do with the kind of person we are than the amount of degrees or money or titles we have.

Parker Palmer tells the story of his own journey inward where all true leaders eventually have to go. He says in his early adult years he wanted to be a college president. He was identified in his mid-twenties as a promising star in the world of academia.

But in his late thirties things weren’t going well. He was not a college president. So he used what Quakers call a clearness committee to get direction. This is an intensive process of questions and silence. What Palmer faced was the truth that he didn’t have any good reason to be a college president. “Why do you want to be one,” someone asked. “I guess just to get my picture in the paper,” he said. “Isn’t there an easier way to get your picture in the paper?” someone asked.

Palmer went deep within and found what was driving him was a veneer of image without integrity or purpose. When I think of great leaders I see people who journeyed inward first. Abraham Lincoln confronting his own racism in his first term. Martin Luther King pursuing a career as a well-paid preacher. Thomas Merton living the bohemian life then walking one day into St. Patrick’s. The first point today is leadership starts from within.

The second point is that the community of faith, the church is built when people follow such leaders. When the two disciples saw Jesus they followed him. He asked them, “what do you want.” They said, “where are you staying.”

It is an odd exchange rendered in the English. But the Greek word for “stay” actually refers to Jesus’ relationship with God and the Holy Spirit. That relationship was where Jesus lived. It is what grounded him, guided him, fed his soul. It is the house he built with his interior journey.

I take that question of the two followers to be a sign of their wanting to “be” where Jesus was, to have whatever it was Jesus had. They wanted him. They wanted his peace, his authenticity, his integrity, his winsomeness. To which Jesus said, “Come and see.”

So the followers went with Jesus that day. Jesus took them to the place – to his relationship with God and the Holy Spirit – that gave him shelter, nurture and strength. Then Andrew runs to find his brother Peter and says come and meet the Messiah.

It was a staggering claim for a first century Jew to make. There was no external sign of authority. By inviting them to partake with him in his relationship to God Jesus gave them nothing the world would qualify as leadership. But as far as the life of the spirit goes he gave them everything.

There is something in the human heart capable of recognizing truth. St. Paul put it this way, he said, “the Christ in me recognizes the Christ in you.”

Isn't it a wonderful gift of the human experience? We don't need a special course, or have to read a book to discover the truth. I am not disparaging the pursuit of knowledge. I am talking about our make-up as spiritual beings, made in God's image, imprinted with the character of God in our hearts, able to recognize truth.

We don't always recognize truth. We are often led astray by darkness.

We'll look more closely next week at that dilemma. But it is a great source of hope today that humans can sort between the light and darkness.

When Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo in 1964 he said something much the same. He said, “I have an abiding faith in America and an audacious faith in the future of humankind.

“I refuse to accept the idea that the ‘isness’ of the present human culture makes us morally incapable of reaching up for the eternal ‘oughtness’ that forever confronts us. I refuse to accept the idea that humans are mere flotsam and jetsam in a river of life, unable to influence the unfolding events which surround them.

“I refuse to accept the view that humankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality.”

Those words are as hopeful in 2005 as in 1964. When life is so little valued on the east side of Buffalo or the east side of Baghdad; on the quiet streets of suburbia where power or wealth suffocate or on dangerous streets of cities where terrorism and tribalism kills.

What Martin Luther King, Jr. was saying, what the Gospel of John tells us today, is that it doesn't have to be that way. We come “factory equipped” to see the truth, know the truth and respond to the truth in our daily living.

But to do so we must be willing, like those two disciples, to follow Jesus when he says “come and see.” We must be willing to follow where that journey leads even to the dark place of fear like that woman in Connecticut or Parker Palmer.

As I look back over my life I can see people who, for me, stood out because something about them told me they had made the journey to the depths of their soul. And when I was a seeker, longing for the truth they invited me to come and see.

My sixth grade teacher, whose husband had advanced muscular degenerative disease, was like a beacon to our class; a high school peer who as an All American athlete could have ignored me, new kid on the block, but he didn't have a shred of arrogance because his father's early death humbled him; a veteran parent at the Hyde School, who was there for me when I finally realized being at Hyde was as much about and for me as it was our son.

In each case it was the Christ, the truth, in them that spoke to the Christ, the truth in me. Truth is greater than lies. Light more powerful than darkness. I agree with Dr. King, the human family will know the daybreak of peace and justice. It begins in a family, a church, a nation when we resolve to follow the Christ whenever he appears, wherever he leads. Amen.