

BECOMING A LEADER

MATTHEW 4:12-23

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We are in week two of a sermon series on leadership. Last week we talked about following the leader, this week becoming a leader, next week serving as a leader.

The ordination of elders and deacons is a good time to talk about becoming a leader. Today's Biblical story – Jesus calling the disciples – offers an opportunity to reflect on what it means to become a leader. Not to mention the search we'll soon be undertaking for the leadership of a new associate pastor.

Parker Palmer, a Quaker, says that before we can be 'out there,' or 'ahead of the pack' as we tend to think of leaders, we have to first look inside of ourselves. Leadership, he says, is a spiritual matter, it reflects who we are "within."

His point is that leadership is not something that has so much to do with externals – with degrees or titles or even skills you might have. Rather, leadership is about your heart, your soul, the deep place within you.

He says, this deep place contains the light or shadow side of who we are. All of us project the light or shadow within us. It is important for leaders to be alert to what is going on inside of themselves. By projecting light or shadow leaders create the conditions in which people 'live and move and have their being' as the Psalmist says. Not just CEOs, college presidents and cabinet members but parents, teachers, and church secretaries too, nearly all of us have some role creating conditions for others' living.

Some examples come to mind – my second grade teacher. Her shadow covered the entire classroom. She was not a happy person. One time she told the boys in the class that any more fooling around and she would drop us out the second story window.

Maybe you can remember a time when you projected your shadow on a group of people. I remember a staff meeting several years ago. One staff member wasn't doing the job we needed, constantly dropping the ball. I was discourteous and cold. Someone told me about it. I got some insight into my own shadow side.

Among the disciples, Peter's shadow side took over now and then. I can relate to Peter. So Jesus regularly encouraged him and all of his followers to take a look inside before we threw stones at sinners or tried to remove the log from someone else's eye.

I finally saw "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon." What I loved about the best practitioners of the martial arts demonstrated in this movie was the balance between their inner life and outward skill.

The story says if you don't have your inner life together you can only progress so far as a martial artist. That's the problem with the "bad guys" in the movie. Their shadow side limits their ability to get to the highest levels of their art.

The "heroes/heroines" in the movie have this inner/outer balance. Their inner peace and light shines brightly. And they credit their masters.

Jesus was a master teacher in this sense. When we look at him we are able to see that it was his inner life, his relationship to God, that enabled him to accomplish great things. At every point Jesus gave his shadow side to God rather than projecting it onto others.

When he was tempted by Satan in the wilderness, he honored his relationship to God. When he was alone in the Garden and frightened about the events soon to unfold he faced his terror and told God exactly what his fears were. On the cross when he felt, once again, forsaken and alone, he cried out to God for strength.

It is the ultimate model of leadership from within, leadership that embraces vulnerability rather than runs from it, leadership that does not presume it has all the strength it needs but reaches beyond itself to the Source of life and light.

Today we ordain and install elders and deacons who will lead us as a congregation. They are called to dream dreams, make tough decisions, be there when someone is hurting, teach the Bible now and then. But most of all you are called to lead us from within.

You might be just a little overwhelmed at the prospect of doing and being all those things and of having this glorious title we hang on your shoulders – elder, deacon, officer of the church, leader.

What I'd like to offer to you today and to all of us wherever we are called to be leaders in our homes, our places of work, and our city, is this saying that sums up leading from within, "If you can't get out of it, get into it."

You may have heard the phrase before. It comes from *Outward Bound*. Parker Palmer shares the story about a time when he was on a steep rock face climbing a mountain. As a novice and not enamored of heights this was a terrible challenge for him. Especially when the instructor told him to repel down the side of the cliff. He says he just froze.

The result was he dropped about thirty-five feet like a brick. There he was stuck on the side of the cliff. He couldn't go up or down. Then someone yelled from below. "If you can't get out of it Parker get into it."

For some reason this advice let him detach from what was holding him back. He did what his instructor said to do. He pushed himself with his feet out and away from the cliff. Then again. Finally he got the hang of it. He came down the steep precipice a changed person.

If you're like me when you find yourself on the side of some terrifying cliff your first impulse is "how can I get out of this?" God, why did you put me here in the first place. I don't have the skill to do what this situation requires.

But moments like that are not about skill. Moments like that are about going down and into your soul. There is no way out of our inner lives, but we can get into them. In the downward, inward journey the only way out is in and through – where we confront our deepest fears and then bet on God's presence and truth.

And if we are willing to go there we will receive the gift of knowing that although we may have fears we do not need to be our fears and insecurities. It is what enabled Jesus to let go of his fears, be vulnerable and ask for God's help. It is the point at which the darkness of our shadow breaks into the dawn of God's presence in our life.

I agree with Parker Palmer, becoming a leader has less to do with titles and skill than it does with a tenacious and trusting resolve to go down and into our souls. To get into it if we can't get out of it. To bet on God's light and promises.

This was the practice of Jesus at every turning point in his ministry. It is what he invited those followers he recruited on the shores of Galilee to do when he promised to make them fishers of people. It is the journey he invites you and me to undertake today as well.

Such leaders project light into the families and congregations and offices and classrooms where they serve. It is the kind of leadership Isaiah had in mind when he said, "the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, for those who sat in the region and shadow of death on them has light shined."

When they left their nets and their father at the lakeside I'm not sure Peter and Andrew and James and John knew that's the journey they were about to embark upon.

Just as those of you embarking upon leadership in this congregation today may not yet know what God has in store.

I guarantee you will find yourself on some rock-face of a decision having but one choice – to face your fears and then to bet on God's presence in your circumstances. When you do, just remember, what you will be casting on all the rest of us is light.

Amen.