

Models for Leadership – Brian Hartley

2 Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10; Psalm 48; 2 Corinthians 12:2-10; Mark 6:1-13

I have been doing quite a bit of thinking this past month or so about ministry in 21st-century America. Having been asked to deliver an address on the future of the church about a month ago, followed by our own recent Annual Conference, and now laboring on a paper for the next General Conference on the role of worship, I have discovered just how much I have been shaped both by my own theological education as well as by the company I have kept in the study. My mentors (when I am behind closed doors) have ranged across the ages, but those most contemporary have been folks like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Henri Nouwen, Frederick Buechner, and perhaps most importantly for pastoral ministry, Eugene Peterson.

In his incisive book, *Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration in Vocational Holiness*, the author looks to recover “the spiritual dimensions of the pastoral vocation in an age that relentlessly secularizes it into career development,” (frontispiece of book). Writing in a somewhat acerbic manner, Peterson suggests rather bluntly to pastors that, “the people in our congregations are out shopping for idols,” (80-81). “They enter our churches with the same mind-set in which they go to the shopping mall, to get something that will please them or satisfy an appetite or need.” The danger, he claims, is that those in ministry will posture themselves as quality-control engineers to provide palatable products with which to attend to those needs. Peterson concludes that, “while everyone has a hunger for God, deep and insatiable, none of us has any great desire for him. What we really want is to be our own gods and to have whatever other gods that are around to help us in this work. We are trained from an early age to be discriminating consumers on our way to higher standards of living. It should be no great surprise to pastors when congregations expect us to collaborate in this enterprise. But it is serious apostasy to go along,” (84-85).

Today’s texts remind us of something of the challenge of this type of leadership through the stories of David, Paul, and, finally, our Lord himself. Each is inevitably faced with having to make hard choices about the model for leadership they will adopt and the way that each will live out his calling. While there are important differences between the stories of each, there is also a coherence that, I believe, supports Dr. Peterson’s contention that Christian leadership requires the smashing of cultural idols, the willingness to walk the way of the cross, and the realization that faithfulness is, ultimately, the most important requirement rather than earthly success. In fact, if I may be so bold, I believe that these texts even go so far as to suggest that leadership is not only difficult but almost inevitably requires self-sacrifice, repudiation, and may well result in the outward appearance of defeat and loss. For those of us who follow Jesus Christ, the call to lead necessitates redefining our calling in the shadow of the cross of our Lord

and Savior and recommitting ourselves to a way of living that runs entirely counter to most of the models of our age.

In today's Old Testament lesson, we find ourselves at a crucial moment in Israel's history as the tribal leaders from not only Judah, but all of Israel, come together to affirm David as their king. David's choice of Jerusalem as capital, in lieu of the old citadel in Hebron, represents a significant shift in the self-identity of God's people. But that shift is portrayed in other ways as well. Note in our text the use of the word, "covenant," to denote what is taking place here. This is not just the ratification of a particular person to lead the people, but a complex liturgical ceremony filled with theological meaning. Samuel's anointing of the young king is meant to represent the fact that David is the crucial lynchpin between the people and their God and the writer here refers to the new king's personal rule over the nation as that of a "shepherd."

For those of us who have grown up reading the Bible, the image of the shepherd is so familiar as to be easily overlooked. From the most familiar of the Psalms, chapter 23, to the evangelist John's development of Jesus as the good shepherd, we find the scriptures literally littered with pastoral imagery. Throughout, the emphasis seems to be on the shepherd as protector of the flock—one who both guides and cares for one and all, particularly those who are most marginalized and in danger of being lost. Certainly this image fits King David who, himself, we were reminded a few weeks ago, left behind his flocks in order to visit his brothers in the Israelite army.

But if we have been following the story carefully, we know that in many ways David stands in stark contrast with his predecessor, Saul. Saul has been portrayed as a "man's man," someone who stood out in a crowd because of his stature. We have seen how David both literally and figuratively could not fill out the king's armor. And, unlike Saul who is portrayed by the writer as having the prophetic gift, David is known for his ability to sing sweetly and softly. In short, though it is clear that David is "mighty," he is clearly cut from different cloth than the statuesque, testosterone-driven, hairy monarch who had preceded him. David, instead, is best understood as a gentle, loving shepherd.

This shepherding imagery dominates much of the earliest literature of the church which describes the role of pastoral leaders. It is very clear that "the church was to be sustained by the responsible oversight of these leaders, who were the shepherds over God's flock," (Jack W. Vancil, ABD V: 1190). And much of pastoral theology and training has been centered around the image of the shepherd. In fact, the very first course I had in pastoral training under Bishop Boyd here at Greenville and later in seminary where I read Seward Hiltner's seminal works, both functioned out of a shepherding image and mode.

So it was quite surprising to me after about a decade in pastoral ministry to begin to hear leaders, particularly those who were being heavily influenced by the megachurch, to talk about how this model was now outmoded and needed to be replaced with a more hip, up-to-date, "ranching" paradigm. Using corporate language and models, ministers about twenty years ago

began to be beckoned towards the role of the rancher who, supposedly, could roam across larger territory operating a multiplicity of ranches (read “satellite churches”) and was much more managerial as a leader than was allowed for by this earlier outdated set of categories. Unfortunately, I believe this model was more driven by the burgeoning CEO’s of 1980’s corporate greed than by any biblical understanding. And, in many ways, it reflects the concern Peterson echoes for congregations to be able to point at their superstar pastor whose television personality would beckon the masses to their church and make of their Christian shopping mall a success in the eyes of the world.

Clearly, however, this is not just a modern problem. If you read the passage from the pen of the apostle Paul with which we are confronted this morning, you will see that the apostle is here having to defend his ministry to the Corinthians who, likewise, were enamored with outward signs of success. Today’s passage comes in the midst of an extended apology by Paul from chapters 10 to 13, in which he uses the rhetorical tools of the so-called “fool’s speech” to parody his opponents. As you will know from having read the Corinthian correspondence, this particular church tended to be wowed by strength, power, and ecstatic utterances—something they had apparently witnessed under the ministry of those whom Paul dubs here as the “super apostles.”

Throughout today’s reading, Paul refuses to give in to this model of ministry and engage in any boasting of his own. While these others have attacked him because he apparently does not sufficiently exhibit the powers and signs appropriate to being an apostle, Paul, instead, seems to take pains to emphasize his sufferings as the ultimate sign of the calling of Christ on his life. Though we don’t know what the particular “thorn in the flesh” is to which he refers, he points out that he prayed earnestly to be relieved of it on at least three occasions and each time his request was denied. Far from being a “name-it-and-claim-it” superstar pastor, Paul here appears to admit his own human frailties and struggles as instances in which the strength of the gospel was being made manifest. He insists that he does not need a miraculous resolution to these difficulties, whatever they might be, because the Lord had said, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness” (12:9).

As I have been re-reading Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s work this summer, I have been reminded of just how central this understanding of ministry is. Something of a child prodigy, Dr. Bonhoeffer could easily have remained here in the United States during World War II with a cushy professoriate at the celebrated Union Seminary in New York City. He loved the American jazz music and worshipping with his African-American friends at the Abyssinian Baptist Church. But his people back in Germany were suffering and, just like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., when he assented to leadership in the Civil Rights movement, Dietrich returned to his calling where he would face self-doubt and eventually death. There would be no miracle for him or for the German church. Whatever success there might be would have to come from the ashes of war as rediscovered in the model of the death and resurrection of Christ. As Wayne Whitson Floyd describes him, this German pastor and martyr can best be understood as “a perpetual pilgrim—for whom being a Christian was a task rather than an accomplishment—who as a

theologian longed to provide that grammar of faith capable of putting into play all the grand voices of the theological greats before him—and more importantly, capable of giving voice to the transformative capacity of the gospel to remake life anew,” (David F. Ford, *The Modern Theologians*, 56).

All of these examples we’ve cited this morning have their ultimate model, though, in the gospel of Christ. And if you look carefully at the first half of this morning’s gospel lesson, you will discover the evangelist’s retelling of the rejection of Jesus. For this writer, anyway, the first section of the gospel comes to a screeching halt with the Greek verb which can be translated as “took offense” (6:3). And what is so painful here is that it is the hometown crowd that turns against him—the citizens of Nazareth. This is somewhat surprising given the wonderful narratives of healing which Hannah referenced in last week’s lectionary reading of the woman with the twelve-year hemorrhage and the raising of Jairus’ daughter. These stories notwithstanding, this section concludes with, “and he could do no deed of power there. . . and he was amazed at their unbelief,” (6:5-6).

Jesus, apparently, had not lived up to the expectations of those who knew him best. The gospel writer seems to be suggesting that the Messiah himself simply cannot meet the criteria set by the world for, as Walter Brueggemann suggests, “he is not successful enough or influential enough or prestigious enough to merit a wholehearted commitment. His invasive presence is forestalled by the carefully constructed preconceptions that enable people to dismiss him,” (Commentary, 419). In short, as Peterson earlier suggested, “while everyone has a hunger for God, deep and insatiable, none of us has any great desire for him.” As with all the prophets before him, the people seem to desire an idol made in their own image—one who is beautiful and successful—to the Jesus who stands before them and bears the very image of God.

As we make our way through the summer months and retell the stories of our own American heroes as we are doing even this weekend, it is easy to look to the world for categories of vocation, calling and success. The quintessential American man, though from humble roots, raises himself up by his own bootstraps, uses violence to achieve his purposes, and stands isolated from the community—a man who brings order by whatever means necessary. In the end, he receives the adulation of the crowd, is named sheriff, and wins the lottery! Part George Washington, part Davy Crockett, part Henry Ford, part Donald Trump—he strides across the stage, bigger than life, rich as a skunk, a Bowie knife between his teeth and six-guns at his side to snarl, “Go ahead, make my day!”

But the danger is that we, who call ourselves first “Christian” and only later “American,” will fall prey to this kind of cultural icon cum graven image. The apostasy of the church usually comes about not through some classic cosmic battle between the forces of good and evil, but as Bonhoeffer and others of his generation came to so clearly understand, the unwillingness of a few good men and women to do the right thing. Today’s texts provide us with several clear examples of what our vocation entails and the paradigm is above all else a counter-cultural one.

The only thing that can sustain us in that calling is what Bonhoeffer called “costly grace.” “Such grace is costly,” he said, “because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life,” (The Cost of Discipleship, 2). If we are looking for a model for leadership, then, this is it: “Jesus bids us come and die.” For, only in so doing can we reclaim the true mission of the church and discover our own heart’s deepest longing.