Leadership of the Heart  
Presented by the Rev. Dr. John Palarine

Looking to follow and lead with our hearts - We need to learn how to follow and to lead with our hearts. I begin this writing with a moving account of leading and following from a most unlikely source for the Church. The book is Leadership on the Line.¹ The chapter I am about to refer to is written by a Jewish professor from the Harvard Business School. His writing and story about the “Sacred Heart” has touched me deeply and once again reaffirmed my strong belief in the importance of leading from the heart.

“The most difficult work of leadership involves learning to experience distress without numbing yourself. The virtue of a sacred heart lies in the courage to maintain your innocence and wonder, your doubt and curiosity, and your compassion and love even through your darkest, most difficult moments. Leading with an open heart means you could be at your lowest point, abandoned by your people and entirely powerless yet remain receptive to the full range of human emotions without going numb, striking back, or engaging in some other defense. In one moment you may experience total despair, but in the next, compassion and forgiveness. You may even experience such vicissitudes in the same moment and hold those inconsistent feelings in tension with one another. Maybe you have. A sacred heart allows you to feel, hear, and diagnose, even in the midst of your mission, so that you can accurately gauge different situations and respond appropriately. Otherwise, you simply cannot accurately assess the impact of the losses you are asking people to sustain, or comprehend the reasons behind their anger. Without keeping your heart open, it becomes difficult, perhaps impossible, to fashion the right response and to succeed or come out whole.”²

Of all that I have studied over the last few years, nothing has touched me more than these words and the chapter in this book on the Sacred Heart. To understand that this pivotal key to leadership is coming from a Harvard professor and appeals to the compassion of our hearts as critical to leadership is for me a revelation that can only come from openness to God in our lives. Leaders in the church should read this book not only because of its many deep insights into leadership but also because of the spirit it brings to our life and ministry no matter where we are. This one principle seems to transcend the context of leadership and unites us in a common task. For me, this is powerful.

² Ibid, 227-228.
Ron Heifetz tells a very moving and profound story on pages 228 and 229 in *Leadership on the Line*. His personal story brings leadership and God together. This short powerful story is an interfaith dialogue all by itself. I won’t reprint the whole story here but simply summarize it to make a point about leading with a “sacred heart.” It tells about Ron and his wife Sousan attending a leadership conference in Oxford, England where Ron was giving a talk. In the story Ron claims the importance to him of his Jewish faith. The conference coincided with Rosh Hashanah. Ron and Sousan wanted to celebrate the holy day but were far away from a Jewish community. They found themselves in a tiny Anglican church. “Ron sat down in front, a Jew in an Anglican church, facing Jesus on the cross. Only weeks before, Ron and Sousan had attended a Jewish workshop on deep ecumenism. Sacred heart was explained as a reflection of God’s promise, not to keep you out of the fire and water, but to be with you in the fire and water.”  

“Ron looked at Jesus on the cross, an image of a man who was tortured for his belief. He remembered that Jesus had been one of the great teachers and thought, ‘You were one of our great teachers. Why not keep each other company on the New Year? Nobody else is here to celebrate with us.’

Ron stared at Jesus and meditated. ‘Reb Jesus’ (Reb is an endearing form of the word Rabbi, which means teacher), ‘Will you tell me your experience on the cross?’

After a time, Ron got very excited and asked Sousan to go outside with him, lie down on the ground and stretch out their arms. After a few moments, he turned to her.

‘How do you feel’ he asked.

‘Really vulnerable,’ she answered

‘Me, too. And that’s it! That’s the message. That’s what we learned about the sacred heart --- the willingness to feel everything, everything, to hold it all without letting go of your work. To feel, as Reb Jesus felt, the gravest doubt, forsaken and betrayed near his moment of death. To cry out like King David in the wilderness, and when you desperately want to believe that you’re doing the right thing, that your sacrifice means something, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ But in nearly the same instant, to feel compassion, ‘Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do.’ Jesus remains open.”

“A sacred heart means you may feel tortured and betrayed, powerless, and hopeless and yet stay open. It’s the capacity to encompass the entire range of your human experience without

---

3 Ibid, 228
hardening or closing yourself. It means that even in the midst of disappointment and defeat, you
remain connected to people and to the sources of your most profound purposes.”

It is leading and following from this place of the sacred heart that makes us who we are as
leaders. Those of us in the church should be ever mindful of this. In my mind there is nothing
more important. Indeed it is the place where God and humans can meet. The Celtic tradition
talks about “Thin Places,” where heaven and earth meet and there is a sense that God is not far
away. It is from this place that we should find true hospitality.

I appreciate Heifetz reminding me that sacred heart is the reflection of God’s promise. This
promise is that God will be with us always even to the end of the age (see Matthew 28:20b).
What more could we ask? What more should we do then to follow the sacred heart and lead
with an open heart? If we do that, will God not lead us where God wants us to go?

**FIVE PRINCIPLES OF LEADERSHIP OF THE HEART**

I would now like to present 5 principles of leadership that I believe lead to transformation.
Hadaway calls this “Leadership for Transformation” I use the term above because it reflects a
way of life that leads to change. The five principles that I now present are not meant to be
exhaustive or all inclusive of the vast and complex theories of leadership. Instead I am being very
selective in which principles I choose for the purpose of this study. It should also be stated
clearly that these are my words for restating or summarizing others accepted and proven
theories of leadership. My five principles are: Lead with passion, with purpose, with vision, with
others and with your heart. When paths intertwine and hearts meet, lives are changed.

**Lead with passion** — If there is one overriding principle in Kotter’s eight stages of leading change,
it is establishing a sense of urgency. Change and growth must begin by moving beyond
“business as usual.” This is so true in faith and in the church and a good place to begin. I use the
word “passion” to reflect the work of the heart. This thesis is not just an academic work; it is a
passion for me. However, unless I can share my passion with others and create the kind of
urgency that Kotter speaks of, then it will only be my way of life. The beginning of
transformative leadership is to invite others to share your passion and then to listen to theirs.
When these passions join, lives will be changed.

**Lead with purpose** — I have already stated that I believe that the purpose of the Church is to
change lives. “Leadership of the Heart” for the Church as I describe it begins with being clear

---

4 Ibid, 230
about our purpose. No adaptive change can take place without a clear purpose. Anthony Robinson, author and clergyperson, lists six strategies for change (he draws from Heifetz) for congregations. His second strategy is to identify the adaptive challenge. Robinson says, “As congregational leaders seek to identify the adaptive challenges facing their own congregations, one important skill is that of asking questions. The question of purpose is central: it precedes in sequence and importance the matter of vision. Often, when anxiety is running high in the life of a congregation, people will ask for the vision. ‘Where are we going?’ This may be a trap for the unwary leader. She or he seeks to answer the vision question, the ‘where are we going?’ cry, and then people dig in their heels and say, ‘No way, we are not going there! You have the wrong destinations for us!’ Prior to the vision questions is the purpose question. What is the purpose of the church? Why are we here? What is a church for? What business are we in? How does what we say about our purpose get embodied to our life and ministry?”

I would contend that our adaptive challenge is to make transformation our purpose. This thesis is a call to that purpose and an invitation to lead in that way.

**Lead with vision** – We must move from our stated purpose to a vision. That is a new way of being. I have defined vision as “a dream put into action.” This implies that this is God’s vision and that we are called to receive it and put it into action. We have to ask why we should be transformed. We want to change in order to be all that God wants us to be. Kotter has dedicated two chapters in his book to explain vision and leadership. We must be able to communicate our vision for change to bring about the transformation that God is calling us to.

Ken Blanchard and Jesse Stoner in their article titled, *The Vision Thing: Without It You’ll Never Be a World-Class Organization* say this: “We’ve been studying leadership and organizations for more than thirty-five years and have come to a conclusion: All the world-class organizations we know are driven by three critical factors:

**Clear vision and direction** championed by top management.

Trained and equipped people focused on implementation of the agreed-upon vision and direction.

---

8 Ibid, 126-127
9 This is an original definition of vision that I have used since 1991 in my youth ministry training sessions on vision. The full explanation of vision that I have developed can be found in: John Palarine, *Creating the Vision for Youth Ministry*, (Clearwater, FL: YouthVision, 1991), available through the author.
Established *recognition and positive consequence systems* that sustain the behaviors and performance that the vision and direction require.”\(^{11}\)

**Lead with others** - Both Kotter and Heifetz urge us to build a team and to trust in that team. Kotter says, “Most transformations are often associated with one highly visible individual. After a while, one might easily conclude that the kind of leadership that is so critical to any change can come only from a single larger-than-life person. This is a dangerous belief”\(^{12}\)

First and foremost, the leader in the church should be forewarned about trying to go it alone. Kotter makes a good point that no matter how charismatic a leader is, he or she will fail without those around to bring change in a unified effort. I would take it so far as to say that all of leadership and change boils down to relationship. While Kotter talks about a guiding coalition (Chapter 4), I prefer to think of it as the body of Christ. As it says in Ephesians 4:11-12, 16: “And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry; from whom the whole body joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and builds itself up in love.” This kind of teamwork is based on lifting up the gifts of others and working together for the common good. Lives are changed by the gifts of many.

Heifetz talks about giving back the work.\(^{13}\) According to Heifetz, adaptive change happens when we work together and the leader trusts others with the work of change. I would say that we also must lift up the gifts of others to help understand where God is leading. It is relationships that lead to change.

**Lead with your heart** – I have already discussed in the first Chapter following and leading with your heart drawing on the image presented by Heifetz of the “Sacred Heart.” I won’t repeat that narrative here. However, I do want to emphasize something that he said which is that the heart feels all of the range of emotions. We must be ready to face the stress of change and the vulnerability of leading with our hearts. Robinson’s strategy number three is, *Regulating Distress.* “When you are engaged in adaptive work, there will be distress. There will be resistance, and there will be pain. Those who lead congregations in doing adaptive work should expect trouble. This is not indulging in masochism or encouraging a persecution complex; it is simply being realistic.

---

\(^{11}\) Blanchard, Ken and Stoner, Jesse, “The Vision Thing: Without It You’ll Never be a World-Class Organization” *Leader to Leader*, 31 (Winter 2004), 1

\(^{12}\) Kotter, *Leading Change*, 51 (example omitted).

There were lots of times on Israel’s journey through the wilderness toward the Promised Land when the people grumbled and groaned and wanted to go back to Egypt. Change is difficult. And adaptive work is difficult because it involves learning, change, risk, and growth. It is what we want, and it is what we don’t want.”

Celtic spirituality has taught us to listen for the heartbeat of God. Life can teach us how to lead with our hearts as our lives are transformed. Passion, purpose, vision, teamwork and heart led ministry can transform our congregations.

---