

Marks of Leadership

From the series: On the Threshold of the Third Millennium

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Of Issachar, those who had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do" I Chronicles 12:32

The gifts we possess differ as they are allotted to us by God's grace, and must be exercised accordingly. Romans 12:6

...among you, whoever wants to be first must be your servant ... Mark 10:43

Well, it's been quite a week hasn't it? No matter what your political party, I think you couldn't help but get caught up in some of the excitement. After all, everyone loves newness and as our new president said, "the mystery of renewal" is something in which I think we all want to participate. The movement of change was so obvious from one generation to another, detectible in the musical sounds. Mr. Bryson, wanting to reflect that which happened in the nation's capitol invited the president to be with us this morning to play his saxophone. But the president was busy, but we have Christopher! It's been a fun week, a great week, and it is so nice that it coincides with the newness in our lives at the top of the year and the newness that is a part of our life together as Christ Community. I have been looking forward to this time to celebrate it together with you and with these who have now been commissioned to their respective ministries.

It is always wonderful to have a new beginning, and I believe that we are at an important watershed in our life together. Coinciding as it does with the events of this past week, we can say, "These are our times. Let us embrace them." And we can say with the poet, Maya Angelou on inauguration day, that this is a time to sense the pulse of this new day, to look out into our sisters' eyes and a brother's face and to the country and "to say, simply, very simply, with hope 'Good Morning.'" That's where we are together. And as we implement our new leadership arrangement in this congregation, I want to begin by thinking with you and with those who have been commissioned to their respective ministries about the marks of leadership.

Those marks of leadership become clear, I think, in the three lessons that were read this morning. In the Old Testament lesson the delegations came to David in order to give their loyalty to him. Their request was that he be king over all of Israel. You will remember from your Old Testament history that Israel's first king was Saul. Saul came to a tragic end but, as it was assumed, as it is always assumed, the royal houses perpetuate themselves. And so there were those leaders around King Saul who sought to establish his son as king. Yet, down south, was the Robin Hood of Israel, young David, with a band of bandits around him, who had such charisma and who had gained such fame in the land.

For seven years the two tribes of the south said to David, "You are our king." But the old monarchy was perpetuated in the north, and the nation was being torn apart with civil strife and civil war. Finally, the leaders of the north could see that the future lay with David and that obviously the blessing of God was not on the House of Saul. If Israel was to find its place in the sun, then certainly it had to make David king over all the tribes. And so the leaders came first, then delegations from each of the tribes.

I singled out the delegation from the Tribe of Issachar because they are characterized according to what I would like to suggest as the first mark of leadership for the Church of Christ. They are characterized as those who had an "understanding of the times" to know what Israel had to do. They were visionary. They were far-sighted. They were practical. They were pragmatic. They were wise. From this, I would like to suggest the first mark of leadership is a holy worldliness.

When I was growing up, worldliness was a great thing to avoid. It was the great sin. But I am using that word in the sense of the people from Issachar who had an understanding of the time. The Church too often has been characterized by people who have been devoted, dedicated, serious, sincere, but lacking sometimes that sense of where the movement of history was going. Where was the cutting edge? And what had to be done today in order to capture tomorrow? The men of Issachar were the kind of leaders who were able to see the handwriting on the wall. They were able to look into the horizon and see what was breaking, and they were able to position Israel in order that it might, under David, realize its golden age. It never had another age like the age of David. Their choice, their decision was confirmed in the prosperity of the nation under this great king. We need in the Church a kind of holy worldliness – that is, set apart for God, but worldly, wise in the ways of the world. Far too often in the Church we have had sincerity and piety, but not always visionary leadership and the strength and giftedness of that leading.

When I think back, over thirty years now, to when I first came to this congregation in 1960, I can tell you what at that time was a surefire formula for being elected to congregational office. You had to be male, on the young side, and promising. You had to come to church in the morning. You had to come to church

in the evening. You had to teach a Sunday School class of irrepressible, impossible young sixth graders. (Laughter) Maybe you'd have to take a stint at being Sunday School superintendent. Then we always elected officers in November and, along about September when family night began and midweek prayer meeting began, if you would show up on Wednesday night, and if you could catch your voice and croak out a prayer, I can assure you you would be deacon the next election. (Laughter) Then, if you served a term or two or three as deacon responsibly, if you grayed a bit or balded a bit, you could become an elder.

Understand, I salute all of those who have served 120 some years in this place because it was always recognized that leadership was nothing if it was not rooted in devotion to Christ and loyalty to the church, but in all honesty I want to say that there was also, too often, a resistance to the strong leader who was making a mark in business, industry, the professions. There was almost a resistance to bringing such a person on board the governing body of the church. Rather, the church became the place of authority for those of adequate piety. But, all over this country still to this day, there are good and sincere people leading the church who lack leadership quality, who lack a sense of where things are going and where the church has to position itself if it would capture the future. Not so the men of Issachar. They said, "This civil war is destroying the nation. The House of Saul has got to go. David is our leader." They had an understanding of the times, to know what Israel had to do.

We need people who are visionary, creative, daring, able to negotiate the passages of the structures of our society in order to make the Church of Jesus Christ a viable institution that has power and thrust, that has integrity, spirituality, but a kind of far seeing vision that will enable us to execute the mission of Jesus Christ in a fast changing world, in an amazing world on the edge of the third millennium. That giftedness is the gift of the Holy Spirit.

I think that's where there was a lack in the past. We identified the gifts of the Holy Spirit with the "more spiritual aspects of ministry" - someone who could lead in prayer, teach a class, make a pastoral call. These are important, necessary spiritual gifts for the nurture of the body. Paul uses the image of the body of Christ as an image for the Church, and in two or three or four different places in his letters he lists various gifts of the spirit, always making the point however that all gifts come from one spirit. They are not to be exercised for self-aggrandizement, but for the common good and that all of the gifts, no matter how they manifest themselves, have not only a common origin in Spirit, but also a common dignity in value. All of the lists are not the same.

I chose Romans 12 today because there is one important distinction in the list in Romans 12. In the 7th verse it speaks about a gift of service. Maybe a more careful translation would be practical service, or in the New English Bible you will find that gift translated as the gift of administration. Now I take it for granted that the leadership of the church will include people gifted in prayer and spiritual

devotion, and loyalty and dedication, and Christian life, but what has not always been understood is that the “worldly” gift of administration is also a gift of the Holy Spirit.

So I want to say that the second mark of leadership is that it is in its diversity gifted by the Spirit for the common good. That’s why this morning, in order to act out what we believe regarding marks of leadership, we have had elders and deacons, and boards of trustees and operations council all mixed up. They said to me, “In what order should we march in?” I said, “It doesn’t matter, you’re all mixed up.” They said, “You can say that again!” (Laughter) We used the same oil and the same words, the same commissioning because, in the diversity of these gifts and the diversity of these people, we have a common source of spiritual power in the Spirit of God, and a common place in which to exercise the gift. In all of its diversity it is still one ministry. It used to be that we ordained elders and deacons and we constituted various committees to do stuff - no more! We are seeking now people with specific gifts for specific ministries, recognizing that, in all of that diversity, there is a commonality of spiritual empowerment for the common good of this institution that needs to be prayed over, that needs to be healed, that needs to have financial finessing, that needs to have visionary strategic planning – all of this, the wholeness of the body, demanding a diversity of gifted persons.

We are recognizing that baptism is our ordination, that ministry is shared, and that what we need to do is appoint people whose gifts we recognize to execute these ministries. The Church isn’t a democracy. The Church isn’t a republican form of government. The Church has nothing to do with winners and losers. Jesus, on the way to Jerusalem with the shadow of death looming over him, shares with his disciples what is in store for him. And James and John come and they say, “Jesus, when you come in your glory, could we sit on your right and left hands?” Talk about insensitivity! Jesus knows the only glory he is going to get is the glory of martyrdom. Talk about misunderstanding! The other disciples got involved too; they were indignant with James and John, but what made them angry was not that James and John wanted to be number one and number two, but the fact that James and John thought of it first! And so you have the feuding and dissension. You have the desire for power and position, for pomp and circumstance, and Jesus had to gather them all and say, “Look, it’s not that way. It is that way out in the world. It is that way in Washington. It is that way in probably every other institution and organization of which you are a part, but it’s not that way in the Church.”

He said, “The Gentiles have great men lording it over them, but it shall not be thus with you. The one who would be great must be the servant of all.” And that, I believe, brings us to the third mark of leadership: humble servanthood. Jesus is our model. He says, “I have come not to be served, but to serve.” Dear friends, what we have done in this congregation is a radical restructuring. I don’t even dare tell the Reformed Church in America what we’ve done, because we’ve turned

their constitution upside down. But then, that's not the first time. Constitutions of organizations are frantic attempts to get down on paper what has already happened in the life of a living organization. I say that with some fear and trembling in the presence of the Judge (Judge Post), but there is a real sense in which our situation is like that of the nation.

As President Clinton said in his inaugural address, "Thomas Jefferson long since recognized that, in order for America to meet its future, it would have to change much," and he said, "We change not for the sake of change, but in order to preserve the ideals of the nation." And so, while we must always be in dialogue with the past, it's like the Constitution of the United States. It stands so that we must always come up against it, but we must also continue to interpret it in the ongoing life of the nation. And so, here too, we saying what we are doing is more biblical, more reflective of this institution which has a ministry function that is *classically* thought of as spiritual, and a management function that *needs* to be thought of as ministry.

In order that the institution may be well positioned, strong and vital, moving into the future, able to execute the mission of Christ, we are so structured now that we can move with facility and agility. We can look into the future on the edge of the third millennium and say, "These are our times. Let us embrace them." We are able to look into the eyes of our sister and into the face of our brother, and to our country, and our faith community, and simply, very simply with hope say, "Good morning...Good morning."