

October 30, 2005
Joshua 3:7-17, Matthew 23:1-12
Dr. Lewis Galloway

“The Greatness of Service”

It took the children of Israel forty years to go from Egypt through the wilderness to the Promised Land. The people had known hunger and thirst, experienced signs and wonders, tasted manna and told the stories of the faith. They had bickered and fought. They never stayed in one place long enough to build a house or plant a garden. In our story today, from the book of Joshua, they are ready to cross the Jordan River and enter the Promised Land. It has been said that if it had been Miriam instead of Moses who had led them, they would have stopped for directions and cut their travel by about 39 years. This day had been a long time coming. Maybe there were some things they had to learn from God before they could enter the new land.

The story is told as a kind of echo of the crossing of the Red Sea. Only, Joshua has taken the place of Moses; the Red Sea has become the Jordan River; and the power of God is represented by the Ark of the Covenant instead of the staff of Moses. Just as God parted the waters of the Red Sea, so the waters of the Jordan River stand like a wall while the children of Israel cross over as if on dry land. Just like the story of Moses, the story of Joshua leading the people into the Promised Land gives us a vivid picture of spiritual leadership. Maybe a part of what they have to learn before they can enter the Promised Land is what it means to be a spirit-filled people who are led by God. Joshua learns that a spiritual leader is one who understands that God's call is to serve.

The story of Joshua and the words of Jesus in today's Scriptures give us key characteristics of spiritual leadership for the servants of God.

Above all else, a leader is a person who listens to God. God speaks to Joshua and Joshua listens. The Lord "exalts" Joshua. The Lord lifts up Joshua - not so that he will be honored and commended, but so that the people will see God's power and presence through Joshua's leadership. Joshua says, "By this you shall know that among you is the living God who without fail will deliver you." You might say that Joshua becomes transparent so that the presence of God may shine through his life. The first task of leadership is to listen to God, so that God may use us for God's purposes and we too may become transparent. The fifteenth century mystic, Thomas a` Kempis wrote:

‘He that follows after Me walks not in darkness;’
These are Christ's words, and by them we are told
How far to imitate His life and ways,
If we would be truly filled with light,
And from all blindness of our hearts be set at liberty.
Therefore our study above all must be
Upon the life of Jesus Christ to ponder.

We listen to God through prayer and through prayerful meditation upon God's word and Christ's life. Some time ago, I attended a meeting of the Board of Trustees of Union Theological Seminary and the Presbyterian School of Christian Education in Richmond, Virginia. At the trustees' dinner on Friday evening, retiring trustees were recognized for their years of service. These trustees had seen the institution through the federation of two schools, the building of a new library, theological controversy, the retirement of key professors and financial challenges caused by the downturn in the economy. One elder from a church in Roanoke said that, when she agreed to be a trustee nine years before, she had no idea how much hard work, time, effort and perseverance it would require. She said that when the Board was dealing with particularly difficult issues she sometimes felt "out of her league" and "overwhelmed by the problems." Yet, she always turned to God for guidance and found it. I would never have guessed that this woman, so respected on the Board for her wisdom, strength and determination, had any self-doubt or uncertainty. She put God first and listened for what God wanted her to do. How hard it is to empty ourselves of all our fears, and even all our certainties, in order to hear God speak the eternal truth in our time and place! A leader who listens submits every thought, every idea and every conviction to God. We do not have anything to say worth saying unless we first listen to God.

Over the past few weeks, the Strategic Planning Task Force has been hosting conversations with members of the congregation about the mission and ministry of Second Church. Nearly 500 people have been involved in these conversations. In the conversations, people have shared their experiences of God in the life of the church and their hopes and dreams for the future. The key skill of those who have led these groups is the skill of listening - not only to the stories and experiences of our members - but to the voice of God speaking through these stories and experiences. In March of 2006, the Task Force will host a Future Summit open to the whole congregation to see whether we have listened well to the Holy Spirit speaking through the church.

In his work, "Fear and Trembling," the Danish philosopher Kierkegaard coins the phrase, "the knight of faith," to describe someone whose life is formed by this capacity to listen to God. Kierkegaard writes that the knight of faith "accepts whatever happens in this visible dimension without complaint, lives his life as a duty, faces his death without a qualm. No pettiness is so petty that it threatens his meanings; no task too frightening to be beyond his courage. He is fully in the world on its terms and wholly beyond the world in his trust in the invisible dimension."

A second key characteristic of spiritual leadership is that a leader seeks the good of others. Self-discipline is not a very popular word in our self-indulgent culture. Self-discipline is the ability to know the self and to use the good and the bad we know about ourselves in a way that encourages the good and restrains the bad. If we are not self-aware and self-disciplined, we cannot accomplish any great thing beyond indulging our own desires. We are created for more than that! To be a scholar, nurse, athlete, engineer, musician, actor or teacher takes practice and discipline. Why do we think it is any different when it comes to serving God? As servants of God, we seek not our own good but the good of others. We seek to enhance life for all people. When we serve on a committee, lead a task force, participate in a class, join a ministry team, we will not achieve God's purposes if we are only

thinking of what we will get out of it. We need to keep before us how we are furthering God's purposes and encouraging those who are learning and serving with us.

Joshua used his talents as a leader to give hope and encouragement to the people as they entered a strange land full of frightening people. He used his gifts to enable the people of Israel to establish homes, plant vineyards, tend herds, grow crops and build cities. The Scriptures say that Jesus set his face on Jerusalem and would not be turned aside. He kept his eyes on the goal and did not let the very real temptations of life keep him from accomplishing his mission. He taught others to discover their gifts, face their challenges, give up their privileges and follow him. Unlike the scribes and Pharisees, who said the right things but did the wrong things, Jesus taught by example. As Richard Baker said in his sermon last week, Jesus emptied himself and took the form of a servant.

Soon we will be calling an Associate Pastor for Pastoral Care. Our Pastoral Nominating Committee has been at work for over a year. They have spent time in prayer and discernment. They have listened to God and paid attention to the present and future needs of our congregation. They are convinced that God is leading us to call an associate pastor who will not only give pastoral care, but who will lead this congregation in developing a ministry of pastoral care. Our Associate for Pastoral Care will model faithful care but will also spend time training and equipping our members to be engaged in caring for one another. It is not enough that we have a pastoral care associate who provides care. We need a leader who will train hundreds of us to be leaders ourselves in becoming skilled lay ministers of care and compassion. I envision our congregation being a community in which we seek the good of one another by serving the needs of one another. We will discover the greatness of humble service.

As Jesus said, "The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled; all who humble themselves will be exalted." Jesus not only said it; he lived it. At supper with his disciples, he took off his outer garments, girded up his loins, took a towel and basin and washed the disciples' feet. Jesus also said, "I am among you as the one who serves." The greatest leaders are those who serve others in Christ's name.

Finally, we see in this story of Joshua how his leadership inspired others. His example gave courage to the fainthearted as they crossed the river, with one eye glued on the wall of water and the other on the mud beneath their feet. There are times in our lives when all we can see is the deep water threatening to overwhelm us. Sometimes, it feels as though we are going to sink in the mud of life's troubles and never come out. God gives us all the saints of the Bible for just such times as these. God gives us the saints who live all around us to keep our vision clear, our faith alive, and our hearts strong. You are God's saints too! If we took a moment, each person here could think of someone, perhaps many people, whose lives have embodied the powerful presence of God for us.

This past year I have been inspired by so many of you who have sustained others through times of trouble, who have prayed for the mission of the church, who have stretched themselves to care for the sick, relieved suffering, built a Habitat house, constructed ramps for the homebound, sorted clothes, worked on hurricane relief and tutored children. Right now, I see members of our congregation who are passionate about developing care

ministries, small group ministries, establishing a pre-school for at-risk children in the Westminster neighborhood and supporting a new Hispanic ministry. It will only happen as we join with these inspired servant leaders and commit our lives and our resources to Christ's mission.

A number of years ago, I remember hearing about a young boy in Washington, D.C., who was troubled by the many homeless who slept in the city parks without shelter from the cold. With the help of his parents, he began collecting blankets to distribute to these men and women. His compassion inspired others to do something about a social need that most folks just didn't see anymore as they drove by in their cars. His compassion inspired me to work providing shelter and basic services for those who had nothing. I thought, "If he can do it, so can I." He helped me realize that, so long as there is suffering in our world, we can never give up doing what we can, with what we have, to help others in the name and power of God.

Next Sunday is Dedication Sunday. God calls you and me to be leaders - servant leaders in our homes, places of business, schools, community and church. A servant leader is one who listens to God and follows God.

A servant leader is one who seeks the good of others. A servant leader is one who inspires others so that they may, in their own place and time, demonstrate the greatness of service to God.