

April 13, 2008
Ezekiel 34:11, John 10:1-11
Dr. Lewis F. Galloway

“The Test of Leadership”

During this season of presidential primaries, we seem to be in the usual “shoot out at the OK Corral” to determine which candidate is the strongest leader and which candidate has the most leadership skills and experience. I do not have a crystal ball to tell you the outcome. In any event, this is not my purpose. I want to reflect with you on the broader issue of leadership from a biblical perspective. I am not here to talk about our presidential candidates, but about you and me and how we exercise our leadership. Yet, what these words from the Bible say about leadership is true for teachers, sales reps, parents, corporate executives, health care professionals, technicians, presidential candidates and computer experts.

Some of us might not be so quick to characterize ourselves as leaders. It’s true; there are many situations in which our role is to follow the guidance, direction, advice or leadership of others. As members of a whole host of communities, groups and organizations, our roles do vary and change. Yet, to say we are not leaders is to miss the opportunities God has given us to guide others in moving in the right direction. As parents, we are leaders in shaping the social, moral, spiritual and intellectual growth of children. In the church, we promise to assume responsibility for the spiritual nurture of the children we baptize. In the community, we are to witness to our faith by how we care for the well-being of others. This is leadership.

Our youth may not think of themselves as leaders, but they are. What a difference one young leader would have made in the situation we heard about last week when eight teenagers were arrested for the brutal beating on March 30 of Victoria Lindsay in a home where they held her captive. Some said that the purpose of the beating was to produce a video that would be popular on the internet; others said it was to get back at the girl for something she said. Whatever the motive, it would have made all the difference in the world if someone had taken the step of leadership and had stood up and said, “No.” Yet, none of the eight did. (AP report on April, 6, 2008).

We are leaders in setting the tone among our peers in the workplace, our families at home, our civic organizations and among our social relationships. The humor in the popular television show, *The Office*, turns upon the misguided and misdirected leadership of Michael Scott, the regional manager of a fictitious paper company named Dunder Mifflin. In many ways, Michael is the anti-leader. Fans laugh because it rings so true to the failure of leadership we see around us and sometimes see within us.

In our scripture lessons for today, we hear about both the failures and the possibilities of leadership. In Ezekiel, God is disgusted with the way the leaders of the people have taken advantage of them. They are false shepherds who have feasted on the flock, bullied the lambs and scattered the sheep. Now, Israel is dispersed in exile among the nations. In a similar way, Jesus speaks of the hirelings who do not care for the sheep and who abandon them at the first sign of danger. He speaks of the bandits and the thieves who sneak in to steal the sheep for their own purposes. We know leaders at every level who use their leadership to serve themselves. We know leaders in homes, businesses, schools, governments, churches, who abuse their power, coerce others, distort the truth, stir up trouble and enrich themselves. The Bible clearly teaches that this is not God’s intention for us. This is failed leadership.

In our scriptures we find several tests for genuine leadership. These tests hold true for whatever way and in whatever context we are called to lead.

First of all, our leadership is a response to God’s leadership. In Ezekiel, we hear that God is so provoked with the ways in which the leaders have acted that God says, “I myself will search out for my sheep and will seek them out....I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep.” (Ez.34:11, 15) God promises to gather the lost, to feed the sheep, to heal their wounds, to strengthen the weak. When Jesus speaks of himself as the Good Shepherd, we hear the promise of God in Ezekiel fulfilled.

God gives us the vision about how we are to lead. God sets the example and shows us the pattern of the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep. We are not “self-generating” leaders. The Holy Spirit catches hold of us and raises us up to be leaders. Christian leadership is about emptying ourselves and taking the form of a servant. In some Christian traditions that use the office of bishop, an emblem of the bishop’s role is the shepherd’s crook, to remind them that they oversee God’s flock. I wanted to title this sermon, “It’s Not About You,” but I was afraid that, when folks read the sermon title, no one would come. Leadership is not about us; it is about catching sight of God’s vision and living it each day. To know how God wants us to lead we have to know the great stories, themes and values of scripture. The Holy Spirit speaks to us through the words of Scripture so that we are able to lead others by following the Living Word, Christ Jesus. It is not about us, and yet, it is about us. A test of our leadership is how well we are rooted and grounded in God. We receive our vision from God. Father Theodore Hesburgh of Notre Dame has said, “The very essence of leadership is that you have to have vision. You can’t blow an uncertain trumpet.”

This past week, I had the privilege of meeting with our newly elected elders to help prepare them for their service of leadership on Session. As we went around the room, the elders shared their stories of faith, their gifts for ministry, their daily vocation and the particular ways they feel called to serve. When they finished, I could feel the creative energy of the Spirit flowing through these talented elders as they prepare to lead us in God’s vision for our church

A second test of leadership is the character of the relationship between the leader and those they serve. Jesus says that the sheep follow the shepherd because they know his voice. The sheep trust the shepherd. Spiritual leadership involves an intimate relationship of trust and caring. In so many areas of our lives there is a breakdown of trust. Soldiers are willing to tackle impossible odds and difficult situations when they know their leader is willing to sacrifice for them.

A number of years ago on a mission trip to Brazil, I had the privilege of meeting the Rev. Dr. Sherron George, who is now the PCUSA regional liaison for South American missions. At the time I met her, she had lived and taught in Brazil for more than twenty years. In everything she did, she demonstrated a deep appreciation for the culture of Brazil and a deep respect for the people. Over the years, she had taken time to learn the language, get to know the people and give the best of herself to them. She treated each person we met, regardless of educational or economic level, as a person of worth and value. She showed remarkable sensitivity to the struggles of the Brazilian church. She was warm, welcoming and affirming. I watched her move among the people and saw the great love and respect with which she was received. I thought, “If we could see God move among us, God would move, listen and speak with the same grace as Sherron.”

It doesn’t matter whether you exercise your leadership as the head of a large business or a salesperson in a small store, as a student in high school or an administrator at a college, as a parent at home with small children or a nurse in the recovery room, what matters is the character of your relationship with others so that they may see Christ, the Good Shepherd, through you.

The final test of leadership is the goal leadership envisions. To lead as a follower of Jesus Christ is to seek not our own advantage, but the good of others. The purpose of Christian leadership is to build up community and to nurture others. In Ezekiel, God’s complaint is that the leaders do not strengthen the weak, heal the sick, bind up the wounded, bring back the lost or practice mercy. (Ez.34:4) Luke tells us that when Jesus was in the Synagogue he read from the scroll of Isaiah, which spoke of God’s servant who proclaims good news to the poor, release to the captives and new sight for the blind. He said that these promises were fulfilled in him. Here in John, Jesus says that he is the Good Shepherd who comes to bring abundant life. The word abundant means “overflowing, superabundant, or excessive.” It is the same word the gospel writers use to describe the leftover bread after the feeding of the five thousand. It is the word Paul uses to speak of how much more abundant is God’s grace than human sin.

Do we, in our relationships with others, serve as deep and even overflowing channels of God’s peace, freedom, healing and life? This past week, in a lecture hosted by the Lake Family Institute, Dr. Paul Schervish, Director of Boston College Center on Wealth and Philanthropy, spoke about how we can live in the world as “spiritual citizens” to give birth to a more civil society. At the very heart of our humanity is the experience of receiving and giving. As people of faith, we know what it is

to receive abundant life; we also come to understand what it means to give life. Paul Schervish said that we breathe into our selves the pain and suffering of others; we process internally those experiences of need, purify them, transform them and then breathe out healing and hope. This practice is a form of prayer that broadens our view of the world and our place in it. As spiritual leaders, Schervish would say that we pay attention to the needs of others and seek to meet those needs.

Each one of us is a leader in some area of our lives, with people we know well and people we have not yet come to know. Sometimes we lead in quiet ways with our immediate circle of family and friends and sometimes we are called to lead in more public ways. Leadership is not an end in itself. It is a means through which God brings abundant life to the world. So, how about your leadership? Faithful leaders receive their vision from God, they build caring and trusting relationships with those whom they lead and they seek the good of others even at the cost of their own lives.