

Leadership

Deuteronomy 34:7-12 ⁷ Moses was one hundred twenty years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired and his vigor had not abated. ⁸ The Israelites wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days; then the period of mourning for Moses was ended. ⁹ Joshua son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, because Moses had laid his hands on him; and the Israelites obeyed him, doing as the LORD had commanded Moses. ¹⁰ Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face. ¹¹ He was unequaled for all the signs and wonders that the LORD sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, ¹² and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel.

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8 You yourselves know, brothers and sisters, that our coming to you was not in vain, ² but though we had already suffered and been shamefully mistreated at Philippi, as you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition. ³ For our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery, ⁴ but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts. ⁵ As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed; ⁶ nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from you or from others, ⁷ though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. ⁸ So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.

Leadership

This morning, let's take a look at three people in leadership positions. The first is Moses. He was born a slave, raised as royalty in Pharaoh's palace, became a murderer on the run, and lived as a sheep herder in a distant land. While tending sheep, Moses encountered God and was sent back to Egypt to lead his Hebrew kinfolk out of slavery and out of Egypt. After ten plagues and a miraculous rescue at the Red Sea, Moses led the Hebrews out into the wilderness on their way to the land of Canaan. But that didn't go smoothly. At times the people were ungrateful, whining, angry, malcontents. Because the people didn't trust God to watch over them and provide a way for them to live in Canaan, God sentenced them to wander in the wilderness until all of the adult generation had died.

In today's text from the last chapter of Deuteronomy, Moses has led the people up to the border of Canaan and they are about to enter the land. But Moses didn't go with them. The last chapter has several wonderful literary images. Moses went to the top of Mount Pisgah and the Lord showed Moses the whole land, all the way to the Mediterranean Sea in the west, and up north to above the Sea of Galilee. Moses lived to an old age, but his eyesight was clear and his vigor was not diminished. Translators, bless their hearts, have made the translation tactful. The Hebrew says that Moses was still virile and potent when he died. After his death, the people wept for thirty days, the period of morning for one's father. Verse nine tells us that Moses had laid his hands on Joshua, who succeeded him. So you see, our practice of laying hands on those who are being ordained goes back millennia.

Moses is called a prophet and he certainly was one. He didn't make predictions about the distant future. Rather, he brought the Law to the people. In all of those years of wandering in the wilderness, Moses interpreted God's will, chided and disciplined the people when they behaved badly, and pleaded with God to forgive the Israelites when they ignored or forgot God.

What kind of leader was Moses? He was reluctant. He didn't seek leadership. Moses had courage. He confronted the most powerful ruler in the world, Pharaoh, with dignity and persistence. Moses didn't see his own people, the Hebrews, as perfect just because he was their leader. **He** was the one who called them a "stiff-necked people." Even though he was sometimes exhausted and frustrated with his Hebrew kinfolk, he never quit on them; he never walked away from leadership. He persevered.

The second leader that we will consider is the apostle Paul. He was a very devout Jew. He was a Pharisee and that means that he was focused on being meticulously obedient to the Law, plus all the regulations of the faith, and even the strictest interpretations of the law. He was, you might say, a strict constructionist of the Torah. He was prepared to defend the purity of the faith against all dangers and offenders. When Stephen, one of the first seven deacons in the church, was stoned to death, Paul held the coats of the men who stoned Stephen. Paul saw those who followed Jesus as threats to the true faith. He got warrants to go find Christians, arrest them, and bring them in for trial – sort of a deputized one-man posse. But after Jesus appeared to Paul, he used the same level of tenacity to tell others about The Way that Christ had shown.

Our epistle lesson is from the first letter that the apostle Paul wrote. It is the oldest book in the New Testament and it's a letter written to the church Paul had established in Thessalonica. As the passage begins, Paul was remembering some tough times that he had experienced. Before coming to Thessalonica, he had been treated badly in Philippi. As time went on, Paul often suffered because of what he taught. When he preached about allegiance to a convicted and executed peasant and praised him with many of the same titles that the Roman Emperor had, the Roman authorities were not pleased. When he preached a God as the only true God and who forbid images of herself, then all of the idol makers and sellers in town were furious with him. When he went into a synagogue and taught that an executed peasant was the Messiah, and that gentiles were welcome to worship him without becoming Jews first, then the local Jews were upset, also. It was no wonder that Paul was whipped, beaten with rods, run out of town, and put in prison. But Paul persevered in the face of anger, pain, and danger.

Paul describes his approach to the people who became the church. He made no attempt to deceive them or trick them. He made no attempt to please them, manipulate them with flattery, nor milk them for personal financial gain. He doesn't sound like a very good salesman. Now comes the odd part. We've heard people wrongly describe Paul as being a woman-hater. But Paul describes himself in feminine images. I was gentle with you. I was like a nurse caring for her own children. Paul used similar images elsewhere. He wrote the Corinthians that he fed them with milk because they weren't ready for solid food.¹ Today, with the availability of baby bottles and infant formula, we don't automatically think about breast feeding when we hear the words milk and children. But that is exactly the image that Paul invoked back then when he spoke of being like a nurse with her own children.

What kind of leader was Paul? He was more than reluctant to be a Christian leader – he persecuted Christians. It took a significant experience of God's call for him to take up the leadership that God had in mind. Like Moses, his life was completely changed when he gave in to God's will. Paul was tenacious, persisting in his role as a missionary despite opposition by the authorities and despite the in-fighting, back-sliding, and all kinds of inappropriate behavior on the part of those that he led. Some people think that the New Testament church was unified in their belief and their worship, and that they were bound together in strong mutual respect and love. Those people haven't read Paul's letters to the Corinthians! Also, Paul was modest. He pointedly told people that they must not be his followers, but Christ's disciples. And he was gentle with those he taught, not manipulating them or overwhelming them with more than they could understand or live out.

Who is the third person in a leadership position? It's you, it's me, it's each one of us. Peter, in his first epistle, wrote to gentiles who had become Christians, saying, "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."² Peter says that we are a royal priesthood so that we may proclaim the mighty acts of God.

One of the significant reforms of the Reformation was to let go of the idea that a priest stood between individual Christians and God, acting as the go-between. The priest would offer prayers and rituals on behalf of the members of the church and claimed the power to punish and forgive. The Reformation rejected those claims, and declared the priesthood of all believers, based on this passage from 1 Peter. We each stand directly before God. My prayers aren't any more important or effective than your prayers. After we confess our sins together, **I** don't forgive you. Rather, I remind us all, myself included, that God forgives us.

We are all priests who are called to proclaim the good news that Jesus taught. We have all been called to leadership. Given the examples of Moses and Paul, how are we doing?

Moses and Paul were, each in their own way, reluctant to be leaders. Some of us have reluctance down to an art. We're so reluctant that we don't become fully engaged in discipleship. We're reluctant to let others know that we follow Christ, reluctant to give much thought to our faith, reluctant to learn more about what Jesus taught, reluctant to be engaged in the life of the church community, and sometimes reluctant to show up for worship. Moses and Paul overcame their reluctance and left it behind them. That's something that many of us can work on.

Moses and Paul both confronted the powers of their time. They insisted on being able to worship God. They both placed fidelity to God above civil obedience. They both confronted oppression, even though it was sanctioned or even imposed by the government. It's easy for many of us to ignore oppression as none of our business - until we're the ones who feel unfair burdens. Unemployment benefits aren't something we think about - until we are unemployed. School conditions are something that only seem like a tax burden - except when we have children in school. Ethnic discrimination isn't something that we're sensitive to - unless it is grossly obvious or we're the one being discriminated against.

It's difficult to be as steadfast as Moses and Paul, to persevere in our call to lead others to the kingdom of God by not only talking the talk, but walking the walk. It's easy to get discouraged when others seem to have no interest in having any sort of faith, when religion gets bad press and people have a negative view of church. It's hard to persevere when our own lives have turmoil and pain, and we realize that being a Christian isn't a warranty policy against all of life's unfairness. Perseverance is not the easiest virtue, but it's an essential part of leadership.

The essential core characteristic of leadership shown by Moses and Paul is the love of others. The love of God set their attention in the right direction. The love of others drove them to be servant leaders, serving with courage in the face of opposition, serving even those who didn't want to be served. The love of others compelled them to keep on leading, day after day, year after year.

At the end of a day, nothing else gives one a sense of worth and contentment like having done good. We are all priests, called to lead others to a life of love and goodness by the life we lead, the things we do, and the stories we share. Moses and Paul have given us an example. Now it is our time to pass it on. Amen.

¹ NRS **1 Corinthians 3:2** I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready,

² **1Pe 2:9-10** NRS