

Servant Leadership

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Deuteronomy 34:1-12

Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho, and the LORD showed him the whole land: Gilead as far as Dan, all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, the Negeb, and the Plain -- that is, the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees -- as far as Zoar. The LORD said to him, "This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, 'I will give it to your descendants'; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there."

Then Moses, the servant of the LORD, died there in the land of Moab, at the Lord's command. He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no one knows his burial place to this day. Moses was one hundred twenty years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired and his vigor had not abated. The Israelites wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days; then the period of mourning for Moses was ended. 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.

Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face. He was unequalled 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, and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel.

Matthew 22:34-40

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

I.

"Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face." We gather today a week after the dedication of the King memorial in our nation's capital, inspired neither by a politician nor a head of state, but rather to the leader of a movement for justice and freedom, and a preacher. This fall, our two churches join together in worship also just a few weeks following the death of the Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, a fiery if less well-known leader in the movement. As we remember the leaders of the past—not simply leaders in the movement for justice and freedom, but in this case also leaders in our own faith tradition, we are moved by a nation's readiness to honor the past. But we are as well haunted by a problem for the present and future. It is the problem of leadership—and especially the prophetic servant leadership required in troubled times, and where we are to look for it....

What is the measure of leadership? And who will measure up, in these times we live in, now almost half a century after Bull Connor, when informed that the Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth had been taken away to the hospital after being injured by the fire hoses, said, "I'm sorry I missed it. I wish they'd carried him away in a hearse."

II.

We live in a time when much of religion has become more and more private, more and more tradition-bound, more and more comfortable and inward looking. Now there is nothing wrong with looking inward honestly, nothing wrong with private prayer. And as for tradition, there is much in our traditions that is worth carrying forward. But what we desperately need in these latter days are clear voices on every level—local, national and international, leaders who grasp, as Moses did, that faith is not only about the sweet by and

by but also about the here, and the now—it is about the struggles of captive people. It is about speaking up to empire and wealth. It is still on occasion about leading a pilgrim people for forty years in the wilderness.

We need leadership that is, as Jesus reminded the lawyer in our brief reading from Matthew, about loving God with all we have. And we still need the prophetic leadership that is about loving our neighbor as ourselves.

Let's be clear and straightforward here. There are still those who will tell you that religion is all about comfort now and salvation when we die. Many of us were raised with the same kind of Christianity that seems more popular than ever now. Yes, it was a religion of the heart. And it put a lot of emphasis on loving God. But when it came to loving our neighbors, it got to sounding a little hollow. Those neighbors were a shrinking group of the similarly righteous who looked like us. And the notion that we should love our enemies, or that every human being was a child of God, or at any rate the behavior, the kind of advocacy and action that grows out of RECOGNIZING that every human being is a child of God—these didn't get too well developed.

These things are a matter of personal conviction. So here is where I come down on the matter of what Christian faith is all about. I am convinced Jesus of Nazareth was a part of a movement that was not only spiritual but also was a movement to set human beings free from oppression and bondage. It was a movement of human liberation that went back to Moses and Miriam and before that. You and I are the inheritors of that movement. It is part and parcel of calling ourselves followers of Jesus. While we find our strength in heaven, we find our feet on the good earth and our hands in the thick of human affairs, and our bodies, every now and again, on the line. There is no separating spirituality from this movement for human freedom, dignity and rights. Not while there is breath in our bodies.

III.

In our reading from the book of Deuteronomy this morning we find Moses, looking over into the promised land, knowing that he will not be able himself to go there. And yet Moses is able to die peaceful in the knowledge that those he has led will get there, and they will be led by another, by Joshua. The writer tells us that Joshua was “full of the spirit of wisdom because Moses had laid his hands on him.” The movement Moses was faithful in beginning will continue!

So what is the measure of the leadership we need, the kind of servant of God called for in our times? I want to hold up the toughness, the fiery nature of a Fred Shuttlesworth, as a reminder that love isn't always about being sweet and justice takes a certain persistence, a certain insistence, a certain clarity and sometimes a certain anger. I didn't know Reverend Shuttlesworth. And yet when I read of his leadership in the 1950's and 1960's I am reminded of a quote from someone earlier, affectionately referred to as the Moses of her times. Harriet Tubman said: “There's two things I've got a right to and these are death or liberty; one or the other I mean to have. No one will take me back alive. I shall fight for my liberty and when the time is come for me to go, the Lord will let them kill me.”

The holy movement to liberate all of humankind takes this kind of leadership along with the gentler spirit of others. The movement of which you and I are apart—the Moses and Miriam movement, the Jesus Mary and Martha movement—takes all kinds. It takes the orator and the quiet worker, the hard-headed woman and the fiery preacher, the healer and the teacher and the person willing to face the music without regard to what is about to be thrown her way. It takes the teenager ready to be counted and it takes the older woman ready to encourage the calling of another.

Scripture today gives us at least three hints about what the measure is of faithful leadership.

In measuring leadership hint one is about *the source of our calling!*

I remember my former parishioner, now deceased, Gertrude Howard, asking me about someone we both loved: “Has he figured out yet that he is called to ministry?” There are some who are able to see the call of others long before they can! Sometime later my son, all of seventeen or eighteen, said to me, “Dad, I have

figured out that I am called to ministry; and I also am pretty sure that it probably is not a call to ordination or ministry in the local church. I have figured out that I am called to serve, but I don't know where yet.”

Of course call is not only about what I feel personally about where God is leading, but also about the affirmation of others in the community of the faithful. Note that Joshua had received an affirmation of his call to succeed Moses—from Moses! A call that isn't recognized by the community isn't yet complete. It remains a private leading.

Hint two in taking the measure of leadership, at least in the context of the pilgrimage of people of faith, has to do with *our center in the deep God-love* that Jesus names as the first commandment of all. There is no one right way to be at this center, or find it. It is impossible to do it perfectly! And we need constantly to come back to a place of mercy and grace and acceptance, as we allow our hearts to be centered in a sacred center that is beyond words, our love to come out of a divine love that is a bright fire, a burning light, a holy wind, a compass in the center of our hearts.

Hint three in taking the measure of leadership is *the love of neighbor* that Jesus reminds us is equal in importance to the love of the Holy One. This is a question not only of how much feeling we have, but also how ready we are to live it out sacrificially. If the feeling isn't genuine--we don't love the people around us, the neighbors great and small who are our constant companion, leadership becomes dehumanized, an abstraction, a half-hearted experiment. And yet if we aren't ready to actually put it on the line for folk, neighbor love becomes a sentimental fraud. Greater love has no one than this, to paraphrase Jesus in John's gospel, than that one is ready to give up life for the sake of one's friends. Real leadership is still there, when all the talk is done. Prophetic servant leadership is found in the readiness to go the distance for the sake of all of humanity, for the sake of being human, and for the sake of a single human being.

IV.

You and I have been privileged to know many very genuine leaders, some up close and personal. None has been perfect. And yet measured by the standards of deep centeredness in God, a clear sense of call and extraordinary love for their neighbors, there are a surprising number of saints we could name, whom we have known personally! Some are living and present in this room today. Our local inspirations, guides and, sometimes, gadflies. Those willing to serve others with all they've got and more, and to struggle for what is right. On this level, we have to this day plenty of potential for leadership.

Still, as we look to a new memorial erected in Washington DC; and as we remember those who led us fifty and sixty years ago in this never-ending and soul-deep struggle for human emancipation and dignity, we can acknowledge that we yet miss that Moses-like spirit. We needs must look among ourselves, even as we look to the distant horizons, and we must ask some questions. We must ask some questions about our own callings. We must re-center ourselves in the love of one who is beyond all names and all labels, the One who appeared in a burning bush, the Spirit which has comforted the fleeing fugitive of every generation. And we must ask ourselves simply, with Jesus' followers of two thousand years ago: “Just what does it mean to love my neighbors? And do I really have to get in as much trouble as you are already in?”

Amen.