

Stewardship Sunday – Different Gifts, Same Grace: Leadership - January 29, 2012, Faith Lutheran, Radcliff, KY

Based on Joshua 1:1-9 written by Pastor Paul Horn

“You are a Leader for Christ.”

Sometimes I wonder what reality TV is doing to us. I mean, I love “Survivor” as much as the next guy, but I wonder what lessons we’re learning. For most of these shows, you kind of have to check your ethics and morals at the door, don’t you? On most of these shows, lying is a virtue, almost an assumption - just something that you have to do to get ahead. On most of these shows, the underlying message is that most people will—in fact, you should—do pretty much anything for money. And on most of these shows, what is the worst thing people can see you as? You can be a liar and that’s a good thing. You can be a cheat and that’s okay. You can step on other people to get ahead and that’s encouraged. But the one thing that you don’t want to be on most of these shows, the worst thing you can be seen as, is a leader. Anyone looking like they’re exercising any leadership is seen as a threat, and quickly eliminated. That’s fine with most people, because they really aren’t interested in leadership anyhow. They think that being a leader just puts a target on your back, and they’d much rather stay less visible and more out of danger.

I wonder if that’s how Joshua would have preferred it on the day of our lesson from Joshua chapter 1. Moses was dead. The LORD had tapped Joshua to be the heir apparent. As Joshua tried to grasp this in his mind, I can’t help but wonder if the events of the past 40 years flashed before his eyes. As the leader of the nation of Israel, Moses had the privilege of providing the logistics of water and food for 2million people and their flocks and herds of sheep, goats and cattle – although the LORD miraculously provided those necessities the people often grumbled and complained to Moses. Some people attacked his leadership position – and over 250 died at the hand of the LORD because of it. The people Moses led were impatient, stubborn and often refused to listen to God’s Word. Sounds like a fine group of people to lead, huh?

At the center of one of those incidents included Joshua. Before the nation marched into the Promised Land, he was selected as one of 12 spies sent to gather intelligence about the land of Canaan, and he was one of only two who came back with a good report – the people were powerful, but with God on their side, they could take them. When the people refused to even try to march in because they were afraid, Joshua was one of only two that escaped God’s judgment - everyone 20 years of age and older would die in the desert before the nation could enter the Promised Land. And for the 40 years of wandering in the Sinai Peninsula, Joshua was at Moses’ side. These are the people Joshua was tasked to lead.

Our lesson also represents a turning point, a significant day in Joshua’s life and really in the whole history of the people of Israel. Moses—the great leader who led Israel out of their slavery in Egypt, who led them to the gates of the Promised Land, who wrote the first five books of the Bible, whom the Bible says that the Lord knew face to face—that Moses was dead. He wasn’t allowed to enter the Promised Land, but died just before the Israelites were to finally enter the home that God had promised to them. And now the mantle of leadership passed to Joshua.

What are some of the things Joshua might have been thinking? Those were some pretty big shoes to fill, don’t you think? Can most people recall the second President of the United States? Who coached the Green Bay Packers after Vince Lombardi? Those are names that are easy to overlook, because they were trying to replace someone who was pretty irreplaceable. Can you imagine the pressure Joshua must have been feeling? This great man, this great prophet, this great leader Moses, had just died, and now it was all up to Joshua. He was going to lead them across the Jordan River. He was going to lead them as they took possession of the Promised Land, drove out all the people that lived there, divided it up among the twelve tribes. This whole nation, two million people, was looking to him for guidance and direction. No pressure there, huh?

And that probably explains what God said to Joshua in our lesson. Three times he uses the phrase, **“Be strong and courageous.”** This was most definitely a challenging time for Joshua as he tried to replace someone who was irreplaceable, but God had a simple message for him: be strong. He didn’t need to run away from what stood before him. He didn’t need to be afraid. He didn’t need to be worried. That’s what God was telling him, but how could he believe that? Was he up to the challenge? Was he a good enough leader? Could he handle it? Would the people listen to him? What if he messed up? What if he wasn’t strong enough, smart enough, good enough?

Look again at what God told Joshua. He didn’t address any of those issues. He didn’t focus on Joshua at all. He didn’t point Joshua to Joshua. He pointed Joshua to God and to his promises. How did Joshua know that God would be able to do all this? Because God said so. God had promised that his people would inherit this land, and now he was promising Joshua that he would be the one to lead them. God had promised it, and that’s all he needed. And that’s the reason he could be strong and courageous. And that’s really the key for any Christian leader—trust in God’s promises.

It sounds simple – for you who are leaders in our congregation, leaders in your homes and communities, for you officers and NCOs in our Army – trust God’s promises. But what do we often do? We have a tendency to rely not on God, but to rely on ourselves, on what we’re able to do. And that temptation isn’t limited to leadership, is it? Are you grieving the death of a loved one... are you a combat veteran struggling with the memories of days past in the jungle or desert or mountains...are you trying to save a drowning marriage? How often have you thought, “I can work this out. No one else can really help me on this one.” How well is that working for you? Too often the problem is that we turn from the one thing that we can rely on, as the LORD said to Joshua, **“Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night.”** And are we going to rely on ourselves when we have to answer the BIG question, when we’re standing before the pearly gates and the Almighty God asks us why he should allow us into his heaven?

God asks, “What is it exactly that you think you can do on your own? Is it you that makes your heart beat or your lungs pump oxygen? Do you really think you can fix your problems on your own? Do you really think that you can bring about a right relationship with me? Are you going to pay for the evil you have done and the good you’ve failed to do to get pass the pearly gates? Will you provide the perfect life required to enter my heaven?”

As God leads us to see that we cannot rely on ourselves we quickly realize that we must rely on him, to offer true comfort, true lasting peace, true forgiveness and true everlasting life. Just as he said to Joshua, he points us not to ourselves, but to him and his promises. Give you a picture of that.

What is the first thing you see when you walk in the doors to church by the offices? You see a beautiful painting of Jesus’ baptism. Do you remember that story? After Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River, the Holy Spirit descended on him like a dove and a voice from heaven said, **“This is my Son whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”** God the Father was setting his Son as the leader – one who would be strong and courageous, someone who would never be terrified, someone who would rely on the Word of God, who would meditate on it day and night, who would not let it depart from his mouth, who would be careful to obey all the law – because we have failed to do so. At his baptism God the Father was setting his son as the leader, the one who would also bear sin of our failures and to die and by his death pay for our sins. Paul wrote in 2Corinthians 5:21, **“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”**

This is what God points us to – his Son’s perfect life, his Son’s all sufficient death. He says to you and me, “My Son has taken your sins away. My Son has provided what was necessary for you to have confidence when you

stand before me. Trust in him for eternal life. Believe and it is yours.” And you do – because you are baptized and forgiven children of God. These truths are the basis for your faith, the basis for your salvation. These truths are the basis for true lasting peace. These promises of God are the basis for your marriage rebuilding, they are the basis for your comfort as you grieve, they are the source of strength as you deal with post-traumatic stress.

God’s promises are also the basis for our leadership. There are hundreds of different books on leadership, even Christian leadership, but one book is more important than all the others, because only one book comes from the mouth of God himself. Since the foundation of our leadership is on God’s promises, it is imperative that Christian leaders be found in the Word. God says the same thing to us today as he said to Joshua all those years ago, “**Do not let this book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night.**” As Christian leaders we will be in the Word regularly, so much more than just one hour a week on Sunday morning. “**Meditate on it day and night,**” God says. That’s the only place we find guidance on how to lead. That’s the only place we find the strength to go on no matter what lies before us. That’s the only place we find Christ’s forgiveness for all those times we were poor leaders, and the only place we can find reason to offer forgiveness when others are poor followers.

But you might be saying, “That’s all fine, but I’m not a leader. What does this say to me?” Are you a husband? Then you are the leader to your family. Are you a parent or grandparent? Then you are a leader to your children or grandchildren. Does anyone ever look up to you— maybe at work, or among your friends, or maybe you’re the oldest of siblings? Then you are a leader.

Even if you are never a leader in any way, that’s ok, too, because good leaders need good followers. Good leaders need encouragement. Good leaders need prayers. And what God tells Joshua is something we can all take with us this morning, even if we’re not a leader. Be strong and courageous. God will give you the strength to make it through whatever he puts in front of you. Stay connected to him through his Word. Never be discouraged, because God will be with you wherever you go.

Even if you never make a TV reality show, leadership is difficult. Most of us today have a hard time even imagining what Joshua must have been thinking as he was taking over for Moses. But God had some powerful words to him, filled with some powerful promises. Whether you are a leader or not, God speaks those same promises to you today. You can bank on his promises! Notice how sure God’s Word is- how many times he uses the future tense in these verses – this will happen. You will be strong and courageous. You will not give up! You will not be afraid! You will not get discouraged! You will meditate on his Word. You will be careful to obey all his Words. Because... through it all, you know that “**the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.**” Amen.