

“Following the Leader” January 31, 2010

Do you remember the story of Peter Pan? There’s one song that’s part of the Disney movie that has to do with what we’re talking about this morning. It’s “Following the Leader.” Now from what I can recall of the song, it begins with these words: “Following the leader, the leader, the leader; we’re following the leader wherever he may go.”

I seem to remember that there was a game we may have played when we were kids that was pretty much along the same lines. Someone would be named as the leader, everyone would watch that person, and whatever he or she did, everyone else was to do, too. I suppose that game was good exercise for our observational skills, but I’m not sure it was very helpful when it comes to understanding much of anything about leadership.

I say that because it seems to reinforce a rather outmoded image of what it means to be a leader—one person who is all-knowing and all-powerful, and whom everyone else follows without question. It’s sort of the notion that “you do what I say; after all, I’m boss.” While that may have worked once, I think it’s doomed to failure these days. Hopefully, we’ve learned enough from past experience to know that isn’t the ideal model of leadership—far from it actually.

It seems to me that was the kind of leader Moses has in mind, at least at the start of the Bible story we have for today. Now up to this point, Moses has led the people of Israel out of Egypt, and they’re hanging out in the desert, trying to make their way in the world, trying to trust God.

Inevitably, disputes break out, and Moses seems to see it as his job to settle any and all disputes among the people. His father-in-law, Jethro, takes it all in. Our Bible passage puts it this way: **When Jethro saw everything that Moses had to do, he asked, “What is all this that you are doing for the people? Why are you doing this all alone, with people standing here from morning till night to consult you?”**

Moses answered, “I must do this because the people come to me to learn God’s will....”

Then Jethro said, “You are not doing this right. You will wear yourself out and these people as well. This is too much for you to do alone.”

Aha! Jethro got it! Being a leader is not about knowing all and trying to be everything to everyone. It’s not about micro-managing, which is precisely what Moses was trying to do. Jethro suggests to Moses that he identify other people who have the capacity to lead others, and to settle the majority of the disputes that arise. He’s to identify and equip leaders of large groups and small. In other words, he’s to identify, equip and empower other people to lead; he’s to share leadership with others. Jethro is trying to help Moses understand what Homer wanted others to learn. It’s this: **“Light is the task when many share the toil.”** Sharing the work turns leadership into teamwork, and involves helping others develop their skills and empowering them to lead.

We can’t think about leadership and teamwork without talking about our Super Bowl-bound Colts. I think it began in Tony Dungy’s era as head coach, and has continued under Coach Caldwell. In Dungy’s book *Uncommon*, he talks a bit about how a true team works. He wrote about the Monday coaches’ meeting when they review game film and determine where they need the most work. Then they view film of their upcoming opponent and together assess how they might approach the game. Dungy said, **“There’s no need for a staff, however, if I’ve already made up my mind about what the team should do and am not willing to listen to other ideas.”**

As I was preparing this message, I found myself smiling as I remembered a saying we heard often from the former senior pastor of St. Luke’s in what I affectionately refer to as the “old days.” He would often remark: “I am their leader; can you tell me where they’ve gone?”

Lots of folks would laugh, and think he was joking, but he wasn’t. You see, he didn’t try to micromanage our every move; he didn’t try to know all the details about everything. He was clear about who he was and what he was about, and freed the rest of us to know ourselves and then to share the gifts we had to contribute—gifts that were not the same as his. To me, that is the best kind of leader—one who’s confident in who he or she is, one who uses their core strengths, and one who encourages others to develop and use theirs for a common purpose or goal.

We rely heavily on teamwork here at The Garden, and everything that happens even just on Sunday morning requires collaborative work by numerous teams. A few weeks ago, Beth Fried, our worship coordinator, prepared a

diagram that showed how a simple idea turns into a Garden service. (on screen) It's pretty mind-boggling to consider all the things that each team has to do to come together each week to offer an experience like the one today! Thanks to Beth was making such a clear picture of how this all works!

There are obviously certain elements that must be present for leaders to be the best they can be, and be good team players. I really believe that each of us has the capacity to be a leader, but we may not believe that, or allow ourselves to develop the skills we need to lead. What are the important elements or characteristics that need to be present in order for us to be effective leaders, and in turn, good team members?

Trust seems to me to be the critical foundation. It is a precious and intangible quality that gives us the confidence to know that the one who leads will act in the best interests of those who follow. The imperative of leadership is a "sense of rightness." According to an IBM publication, "In its highest sense, leadership is integrity."

A leader, a team member, must be someone who is both trustworthy and trusting. Dictionary.com defines trust as "firm reliance on the integrity, ability or character of a person or thing." That means that a leader must be a person who is reliable, who has solid core values, and who does his or her best to live by those principles. He or she must be someone who embodies trust and evokes the trust of others. All team members individually must be trustworthy, and must have trust in the other people who are part of the team.

I really believe that effective teams are those on which each person can step into leadership at any moment, and can be trusted to carry out the work at hand. That means that the members of that team have their own skills and abilities and are ready and willing to use their strengths in working toward a common goal or purpose. It's important to note that it's best if the team isn't made up of people who have all the same skills, because an homogenous group results in a very one-dimensional approach to every task. Rather, it's vital that the skills, interests and abilities are diverse, but are aligned around the common mission and vision.

Another attribute of a good leader and of good teams is the passion for lifelong learning. As we've said numerous times here at The Garden, life is about learning and growing and evolving. Think back to Moses; he was willing to

listen to what Jethro had to say, and learn a new way of leading. He had to learn to let go of the need to control and know everything that was going on, and help others step into leadership roles. Just as he learned new ways of leading and being, so, too, do we need to do the same. Dennis Waitley put it like this: "Never become so much of an expert that you stop gaining expertise. View life as a continuous learning experience." Regardless of our role or station in life, we have to commit ourselves to lifelong learning.

I believe there's another essential when it comes to both leading and following, and that is to believe it is important; that the mission we are about has purpose and meaning, and adds a sense of purpose to our own lives. Each of us has the capacity to make this world a better place, and we do so by knowing in our hearts that the life we live and the work we do contributes in some small way to the betterment of the world.

The late Katherine Graham, the first female CEO of a Fortune 500 company said, "To love what you do and feel that it matters—how could anything be more fun?" To me, the key to her statement is that we feel that whatever we do matters, has meaning and purpose to it, and has a lasting and transcendent quality to it.

Another element that true leaders possess is the capacity to envision and to share that vision in such a way that it becomes a driving force for those who are part of the team. This is someone who can see the big picture, can paint it for others to see, and is willing to step out in faith to bring that vision into reality.

In the case of Moses, the original vision came from God—the call to lead the people out of Egypt. He had to rely on his faith in God, and be willing to take on the risks and dangers that might accompany the vision. The vision was so compelling that he was willing to do that very thing.

As Theodore Hesburgh said, "The very essence of leadership is that you have to have a vision. You can't blow an uncertain trumpet." I believe that if the vision, any vision, truly comes from God, it is a certain thing. It still may involve fear and risk, but with God, all things are possible and can happen.

And that leads us to the necessity of leaders being spiritually grounded. If the mission is a God-thing and is that which is good and loving, it supplies the energy needed to do the hard work to turn the vision into reality. That means doing whatever it takes, persevering and

staying at it. As Moses quickly discovered, not everyone is happy all the time, even with a compelling vision. Nonetheless, the vision remained firm, Moses trusted God and kept at it, believing it was exactly what God wanted him to be about.

There are many more characteristics we could name when it comes to leadership and teamwork, but I believe the ones we've talked about are among the most important. Trust is the basic; encouraging and empowering others is essential; using our skills and abilities to the fullest helps us know a sense of meaning and purpose; following a compelling vision from God gives us the energy and courage we need.

So, I guess the question each of us needs to consider is: Do I possess those characteristics? Am I a leader and a good team player?

Closing:

I like what William Arthur Ward wrote about leadership. He said, "Leadership is a serving relationship that has the effect of facilitating human development." That seems to say it all.

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace.
Amen.