

Leadership

Matthew 23: 1-12

What is leadership to you? What does it mean to lead? It certainly means to provide vision. Sometimes it means to tell people what to do. You have to know what's going on and take responsibility in order to be a leader. In some sense, regardless of gender, a leader has got to be "the man" because when a leader stands forward, the organization lowers its level of anxiety.

What does Jesus say about leadership in today's lesson from Matthew's gospel? He uses the example of Pharisees and religious leaders whose leadership seems to involve their own ego trip. They establish lots of rules for their followers to follow. Jesus tells the disciples to watch out!

He also uses the example of a servant as the leadership model for the disciples. Jesus actually talks about leadership by talking about how to be a follower. He says to follow the good words of their religious leaders, but to beware of their example. Followers need to be careful where loyalty is given.

Think of examples in your life when you've been a good leader? How about those times when you've been a good follower? The two ideas of leadership and following seem to be inseparable

What, then, does Jesus mean about following a leader? It does seem that there is no shortage of people willing to offer leadership. There are always those telling you what to do - an abundance of people wanting to give you advice.

According to the gospel lesson, there are some examples of leadership not to follow. Don't follow leaders seeking a culture of adoration. Beware of following in a situation that is fostering dependence on the leader. Remember Jesus' image of leaders who "love to sit at the head table at church dinners, basking in the most prominent positions, preening in the radiance of public flattery, receiving honorary degrees, and getting called 'Doctor' and 'Reverend.'"

What are examples to follow? Follow leaders who follow God's Spirit. Trust a leader who points to God rather than herself. Seek leadership that fosters independence, self-reliance, and a sense of self-identity among followers.

This congregation identifies its style as "congregationally-led". What is congregational leadership? An organization cannot long survive without clear leadership. Things become unhealthy and chaotic. Yet, leadership does not mean there is one who is above the others telling everybody what to do. In our congregationally-led church, each of you exhibits leadership in the way you act and the way you choose to express yourselves, or not to express yourselves.

Individuals members or non-members provide leadership here at Crossroads church by clarifying their own passion and identifying their giftedness for membership, then bring that to the congregation. They share their enthusiasm for where God is leading them which inspires others. That leadership becomes more effective as more people respond to the prompting of the Spirit in their lives.

Ultimate, we say that God is our leader. We look to God for leadership through prayer. God tends to speak to us through each other and through the experiences of our lives and our community.

What about pastoral leadership? Pastoral authority is not automatically conveyed with the job. It is earned. Within the church, the pastoral authority that is earned is the right to speak and be heard in any situation and circumstance in the church's life. This authority is not limited to professional pastors. It includes church elders regardless of age – those whom you trust and whose counsel you seek.

How is this authority earned? It is earned in the crucible of your life's challenges by those who are there for you and who gain your trust. It is earned, in the confusion of difficult choices, by those in whose presence you find your own pathway becoming less clouded and more clearly visible. It is earned in the midst of the fear of loss and anxiety by those in whose spirit you find your own courage. They earn pastoral authority.

In trust that I have earned a measure of authority and an amount of trust, I will share with you honestly where I see this church. Where are we and what do we have to offer?

This congregation formed out of a split with Broadway Baptist Church here in midtown Kansas City almost seven years ago. We are still finding the appropriate distance, the appropriate balance of distance and togetherness factors, in relationship to the Broadway orthodoxy. This orthodoxy is not the same thing as the Broadway congregation itself. It refers to what it is that felt so right to so many of you about being at Broadway Baptist Church – about being part of that worshiping community, for those who were part of that experience.

We are continuing to embrace an identity that was shaped at Broadway Baptist Church. We still sing many of the same songs. Our style of worship is very similar. Many of the same small groups that came out of Broadway are still meeting!

We are discovering how Crossroads Church is and is not Broadway in exile -- without the name or the building, but perhaps with the legacy. It is good or bad? That depends. It is a rich legacy, but more and more of the people attending Crossroads have not shared that same Broadway culture. If it is holding this congregation back, or excluding people, then it is more destructive than formative.

During my tenure as senior pastor, it has become clear to me that this congregation is seeking a way to embrace Christian message more fully. Many of the Church's traditional formulations are not working for many members today. Lots of folks have lots of questions. We are actively working to ask our questions and to live into some answers. Sometimes these answers are slow in coming. Sometimes we don't like the answers we are finding. Still we persevere in the asking and in the seeking.

What are Crossroads folks believing these days? It is dangerous to generalize, but it's important to hear and to see a big picture of what's going on, at least from my perspective.

What do we believe? It's not homogeneous. Generally, there is a commitment to openness in this congregation. We believe in the importance of peace and justice and

that love is the bottom line. We believe in the importance of worship and generally see the style of worship as creative and contemporary.

What do we believe about God? This congregation tends to see God as Spirit – neither masculine nor feminine. People seem to be questioning the idea of God as *theistic*, to the extent that people even know what *theistic* means? Generally, theism is the idea that God is “the big guy in the sky” – a particular being who lives in a particular place (heaven). It is the traditional Christian, Jewish, and Muslim understanding of God portrayed, for the most part, in the Bible.

There is a growing openness within the congregation to the idea of God as *panentheistic*. This simply means that our concept of God is such that “everything (pan) is in (en) God (theistic)”. We often refer to God as “the ground of all being” and the “Eternal Spirit”. These are *panentheistic* images for God and reflect the biblical images found in many of the Psalms and with Paul’s (in Acts) image of God as where “we live and move and have our being”. With this concept, there are concerns and questions, especially about prayer – to whom do we pray and how does God answer prayer? We continue to ask these questions and seek to live into answers.

What do we believe about Jesus, the Christ? There are some real differences of thought within the congregation. Some are very traditional and embrace the understanding of Jesus reflected in the Church’s creedal statements (such as the Nicene Creed). This is an understanding of Christ’s dual nature. It includes the belief that both the human and divine were present in the historical Jesus and that Jesus was aware of both nature in himself.

Some of our members holds very modernist views. They tend to focus on the pre-Easter (historical) Jesus as completely human. He was a teacher and a prophet. These members tend to question a God-presence in Jesus that is more than the God-presence in you and me. Many others in the congregation find themselves between these two understandings.

There is a lot of questioning and a lot of resistance to the idea of *substitutionary atonement*. This is the idea that God chose Jesus’ death to substitute for punishing us for original sin. Our members tend to embrace other understandings of the significance of Jesus’ death. These include a belief that a God of grace and love doesn’t need a sacrificial victim in order to forgive and reconcile heaven and earth. The biblical understanding, seen within the context of Jesus’ Judaism, is that Jesus’ death marked the end of a need for sacrifices at all with the Jewish tradition.

What do we believe about the Holy Spirit? There is a strong charismatic bent by many in this congregation. This is witnessed by our emotive worship, with hands waving. Sometimes there is some speaking in tongues. Certainly, there is a strong sense of the presence of the Holy Spirit animating life of the congregation.

There is also a strong intellectual focus here. This is a congregation of thinkers and seekers. People are asking challenging questions and not settling for pat answers – sometimes a frustrating journey.

This congregation offers a blend of emotional worship and thoughtful theology that is fairly unique among Christian churches. This blend is clearly an important piece

of our identity as a congregation. This is a community where creative imagination is prized.

What do we believe about Church? There is a tendency toward belief in universal salvation – that somehow, some way, God will save all people. There is a belief that God will include everyone regardless of religion, race, or time in history.

Ours is a very ecumenical congregation. There are probably two dozen Christian traditions represented when we gather for worship. Ecumenicity is in our bones -- in our congregational DNA. We are also pretty open to interfaith relationships. We recognize the importance of reaching out and of understanding people of all faiths and of no faith. This is exemplified by our recent series of world religions.

There is a strong emphasis on lay ministry in this congregation. Witness the number of work groups, standing committees, and community meetings. We are a congregationally-led church.

I must classify ours as a “low” theology of the ordained clergy. This is not to denigrate any clergy. It just means that we believe strongly that all are ministers. Ordained clergy have a specific call, but not a higher call. Good examples of our understanding of ordination is that we have lay leaders for communion, lay leaders for worship planning, and lay persons for worship leadership.

Crossroads generally has a “low” theology of church. What this means is church is not a hierarchy bound together by those following in a train of apostolic succession – not a hierarchy of bishops and priests. We believe in church as community. There is a commitment to membership and to involvement in life of church. Church is not a transaction, a place to punch your ticket to heaven. Church is a matter of relationship through which to find God’s reign already begun here on earth.

We think of worship as generally upbeat, though it is often contemplative. There is an expectation that worship will often be new and innovative.

Something that is very important is to hear the congregational voice. This congregation values hear yourselves speak -- hearing each other’s voices in worship. This can take place with responses to silence, responses to my questions, and opportunities to pray.

This congregation has a unique characteristic – an extremely high percentage of people with seminary education. This characteristic can be both positive and negative. You tend to be fairly reactive to what smacks of traditional church. You exhibit what seems like a fear of losing “edginess” as church.

There is some fatigue. You’ve been working hard, especially some of you, giving birth and giving shape to this congregation. It is hard work.

The question arises: “Can you keep this up?” Can we be church in a meaningful way without wearing ourselves out? It’s not hard work that wears people out. What burns people out is feeling responsibility for that for which you have no power and no control. We get worn out working toward a future for which there is no vision.

Why I think we’ll be okay is that we’re working to be a healthy congregation. It’s been said, “It is more important to know what sort of patient has the disease than what sort of disease the patient has”. (Sir William Osler) Author Peter Steinke (*Healthy*

Congregations) writes, “Healthy congregations are purposeful organizations. They keep asking ‘What is God calling us to be? What is the meaning of what we do? They have a working vision that conveys the message that together they can influence their future.”

This congregation has a working vision. We’re working on it all the time. “Vision always requires revision. Health is a continuous process. Healthy congregations keep at the work of visioning and re-visioning.” (Steinke)

Congregations, like individual people, participate in seasons, rhythms, and growth processes. Healthy congregations are interested in the growth of people. Robert Greenleaf, coined the concept of servant leader, writes, “The best test [for determining healthy congregations is] ‘Do those served grow as persons? Do they become healthier, wiser, freer, and more autonomous. Are they more likely themselves to become servants?’” If this is happening, it is a good sign of health.

Rick Warren (*The Purpose-Driven Church* writes, “Healthy churches grow. Seek health and growth will come”.

Do you remember the words from today’s gospel lesson? “Do you want to stand out? Then step down. Be a servant. If you puff yourself up, you’ll get the wind knocked out of you. But if you’re content to simply be yourself, your life will count for plenty. “

Jesus calls us to be ourselves -- as individuals, as a congregation. God calls us to become fully ourselves – to become more who we are, who God has created has to be, who life is shaping us to be, to become all we can be in Jesus’ name. This is the path of our salvation.