

Mission & Leadership

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Preaching on:

2 Corinthians 12:12–31

Luke 4:14–21

In his book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey tells a story about people working in a jungle. There are some people down in the undergrowth of the jungle, and they're just hacking away at the vegetation with machetes. They're making clearings and they're blazing paths. And there's another bunch of people, just behind them, who are working to make sure those machete swingers are working as efficiently as possible—they're creating programs to teach the cutters the best machete techniques, they're organizing blade-sharpening schedules, and they're making sure if anyone gets injured that they get bandaged up.

Together these two groups of people have lots to do (it's a huge jungle) and they're working at maximum efficiency—it's really a marvel to behold. And then, last but not least, there's a person who decides to climb way up in a tall tree to survey the landscape. And after looking all around, she shouts down to the groups on the ground, "HEY! WRONG JUNGLE!" And from down below comes the reply, "Shut up! We're making great progress down here!"

Productivity and efficiency only tell us that we're good at what we're doing. They don't provide any indication that we're doing the right things. Sometimes, the ladder is leaning against the wrong wall. And when that happens an individual or an organization needs to pivot away from busyness and efficiency, away from managing all the old expectations, and pivot toward leadership. True leadership, Covey tells us, requires climbing a tall tree for a big-picture vision. Leadership is that part of the individual or the organization that begins with the end in mind. Leaders are people who have a specific vision—for themselves and others—of a destination. And seeing that goal, they're able to evaluate if we're actually doing the right things, going in the right direction, working in the right jungle. They see where we need to go, they know how to get there, and they want to bring everyone along.

What happens when Jesus returns to Nazareth after his baptism and after his time away from home? What happens when he goes to his childhood synagogue, where he grew up, and reads from the Isaiah scroll? When he left home, he was just Jesus, the carpenter's son, the son of Mary. But he returns home changed. He returns home a leader. And why is he a leader? Not because he's up there reading. Not because he's giving a sermon. Not even because he's making bold statements. He's a leader because he's climbed to the top of the tall tree of the prophecies of Isaiah, and he's beginning his ministry with the end in mind.

And what is that end? Good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, the oppressed set free, the arrival of the Jubilee year. He uses it—this scripture reading from Isaiah—almost like a mission and a vision statement. Jesus is saying, These are God's core values, and this is what my ministry is going to work to achieve.

How many of us down here on the ground, working on the ministries of our church, or working out the purposes and goals of our individual lives, hear this like Jesus is yelling down to us, "HEY! WRONG JUNGLE!" And we want to yell back, "Shut up! We're busy! We got enough to worry about! Don't you pile on!" Why is that our response?

I mean, it's right there on the scroll—this is good news! But we hear it as bad news, somehow, because it seems too hard, too idealistic, too impossible, too not-what-we're-already-doing. Jesus is the head of the Church. And many of us declare in our lives, "Jesus is Lord!" But sometimes it's really hard to really listen to real leadership—to the people (or to the parts of ourselves) with the audacity to wonder if we're toiling away for the right reasons or for the right goals—leaders with the audacity to suggest that God's ends should be our beginning.

And we should note that Jesus ran into some real resistance here right away. We only heard half the story of Jesus' first sermon this morning. Of course, you all remember how it ends. The home-town crowd starts saying, "This guy isn't a leader, he's just Joseph's son. Shut up!" And Jesus, pot-stirrer that he is, pushes his luck. He doubles down. He says not only is this the message of good news for us, it's for everybody else too—the whole world. We're not going to leave anybody out. Well, that was just too much for the good people of Nazareth. They pull Jesus down from that tall tree of his and they try to throw him off a cliff!

And that experience, I think, teaches Jesus an important lesson on leadership. When leadership is invested in just one person, it's fragile. What if Jesus hadn't managed to slip away from the crowd that day? What if they had pitched him off that cliff? Just imagine everything we would have lost. I think Jesus feels that too. And after escaping that crowd, the very next thing he does is he calls his disciples. This movement needs to be bigger than one leader. This mission is bigger than any one person, even if that one person is the Messiah, the Son of God. I need disciples, I need apostles, I need leaders because this vision properly belongs to the whole world.

After his Civil Rights victories, Martin Luther King, Jr. turned his attention to the Poor People's Campaign—a diverse movement of the nation's poor people: white, black, Latino, and Native American. When he was assassinated, the campaign limped on for a little while, but ultimately it fell apart because too much of the leadership was invested in King himself, and the leaders left behind to pick up the pieces after him couldn't agree on a direction for the campaign.

Now, 50 years later, in popular movements for justice you don't see individual leaders lifted up anymore in the way that King was. Instead, leadership is more likely to be distributed throughout the movement, so that the loss of any one leader will not be fatal to progress or to the mission. Leadership is fragile when it's invested in just one person.

The Apostle Paul gets this, I think. He gives us another metaphor—not a jungle metaphor, but the metaphor of Jesus' body. We are the Body of Christ, he says. And like any body, the Body of Christ is made up of many diverse parts all working together. Some people are hands, some are feet, some are eyes, some are spleens, but whatever part we are, whatever skills we possess, whatever functions we perform, the vision of Jesus' good news and God's Kingdom belongs to us all, united in the one Body of Christ. We're not three kinds of people in a jungle. We're many different parts in one united body.

Christ's continuing mission does not belong to any one dictator, any one leader, any one minister. It belongs to all of us in the Body. Now, sure, there's gonna be some people who will be lifted up for specific functions in leadership—like me, like Tom Mustachio, like Dorothy Waldt, our council president, like our other staff and officers and ministry chairs, but the mission has to belong to us all. The passion has to belong to us all. The vision has to be shared and curated by the whole community, by the whole Body. And that is because vision and mission and leadership, without love, is empty. A

vision in one person is just an act of will. A shared vision, held collectively by all of us, is an act of love.

At the end of our reading this morning, Paul says, “But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.” That “still more excellent way” is the beginning of Paul’s famous chapter on love which you all know and you’ve all heard many times at many weddings, and which we’ll get to next week. But just as a preview, when I say that everybody needs to hold the vision together because vision and mission and leadership without love are empty, I don’t just mean that everybody has to love the vision like Jesus loved the vision.

I also mean—and this is the more important part—that just like Jesus loved us we have to love ourselves for who we are and where we are right now. Jesus didn’t love the hope or the dream or the mission or the future more than he loved the actual imperfect world that he came for just as it was. And we shouldn’t either. We shouldn’t love some goal or some vision, no matter how noble or right, more than we love who we are right now. I love each of you for who you are right now. And I hope you love each other the same way. I love Glen Ridge Congregational Church exactly as it is today—knowing that there things we could be doing better. I love the world, in all of its brokenness and trouble, exactly for what it is.

It’s like being a parent. We love our kids for who they are right now, even when their behavior and decisions are less than impressive. And by loving our kids for who they are now, we empower them to grow, to take risks, and to live a more selfless life of good news for other people. When we love ourselves and one another for who we are—right here, right now—we begin to discover in that love, the strength and creativity and commitment to climb a tall tree and look around.

So, let me recap what I hear our scripture readings saying to us this morning:

Step 1. Love one another.

Step 2. Listen to what Jesus says about the vision for our lives, our ministry, and our church.

Step 3. love one another.

Step 4. Send some part of the Body up a tree to take a look around to make sure that we’re in the right jungle and that we’re working with the right end in mind.

Step 5. Love one another.

Step 6. While loving on one another, listen to the report from the treetop.

Step 7. Love one another.

Step 8. Using love, Jesus’ teachings, and the treetop report, work together as a whole Body to discover a mission and a vision big enough, bold enough, and bright enough for the church and the savior that we love so much.

Step 9. Love one another.

Step 10. And love the whole rest of the world too.