

The Origin of Order and Leadership

Genesis 1:1-5 (Mark 1:4-11)

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January 11, 2015

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

Then God said,

“Let there be light”; and there was light.

And God saw that the light was good;

And God separated the light from the darkness.

God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night.

And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

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I have one of my favorite photographs hanging on the wall in my study. It is picture of a church that was taken by a friend who fancies himself somewhat of a professional photographer.

The Yosemite Valley Chapel sits at the base of the Sierra Mountains– within view of Yosemite Falls and almost within the shadow of the Dome of the Rock. It is a simple church – wooden, in the shape of a cross, with a modest steeple.

What makes this photograph my favorite, however, is not the church. It is the 300-foot sugar pine tree that stands right beside the church. And that towers over the church. The picture is taken so that your eye catches both the apex of the steeple and the apex of the tree. I have it in my study because I think that kind of perspective is helpful.

Sometimes, when I have had a particularly good week – and things with my job are going well...the stewardship numbers are up, I received a few extra positive comments about a sermon, we accomplished something significant in a meeting, the staff team is really clicking, we created a new partnership in the city that has the promise of really changing lives...sometimes when I might run the risk of feeling a little smug about my leadership I look at the picture in my study to remind me of just who needs to be getting the credit.

Other times, when the week has not been so good...and my tank feels a little empty, or there has been a conflict, or it is a little harder to concentrate in my prayers, or I find myself doubting whether the class or the sermon or the mission partnership or the hospital visit made any difference at all....I look at the picture and the distance between that steeple and that pine tree feels like grace. A reminder that I am not the one responsible for making ministry a success. That my responsibility is to follow, as faithfully as I know how. And to trust that the God who gave us the church has a bigger vision and promise for what the church can and will be.

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In the eighth Psalm, as the psalmist considers his place next to that of the God of creation, he says,

*When I look at the work of the heavens, the work of your fingers
the moon and the stars that you have established;
What are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?*

When it comes to understanding our role in the order of things, the most elemental truth is also the thing that is the easiest to forget: we are not in charge.

We are not in charge.

Now, many of us have a hard time with not being in charge. I've been your pastor long enough to say that, I think. I know you... With the number of type-A personalities sitting in the pews this morning, or in the choir loft, or standing in the

pulpit, I can confidently assume that some of us get down right twitchy when we consider what life would be like if we were not at the helm.

Yet, those of us who might not feel comfortable not being in charge also know how much pressure there is to pick up the mantle of leadership and cast a vision, and set expectations, and make decisions. And it is more than just pressure – there is a need for identified leaders who guide an organization or a community. Without people who – at least – appear to be in charge, the result would be chaos and confusion.

This is the paradox of leadership for a Christian: an understanding that we are not in charge and the reality that for the world to work somebody needs to be.

The theologian Reinhold Niebuhr writes about this paradox. Building on many before him, Niebuhr describes the paradox that faces human beings as one of freedom on the one hand and finitude on the other. As people who are created by God, we have a certain freedom that we choose to exercise – places where our choices and our leadership matter. But as people who are created by God, we also have limits from which we cannot escape: namely the reality that one day, all of us will expire and return to the elements from whence we came.

According to Niebuhr, knowing that we live in that paradox means that we are anxious.

And that anxiety – according to Niebuhr – is the reason that we sin.¹

It is not a sin to be anxious. Indeed, there are plenty of examples of how anxiety can be healthy and helpful.

But anxiety about our limits – an anxiety about the fact that we are not, ultimately, in charge of our lives – that anxiety can lead us to make bad decisions.

It is our anxiety that leads us to take more than we need – a practice that leaves others without enough.

It is our anxiety that leads us to want to know more than we need to know – and sometimes the consequence of our curiosity is found in unleashing a power that we do not understand.

It is our anxiety that leads us to make judgments about what people or what nations are most valuable or valued – a human tendency that elevates the self or our nation or group above every other self or nation or group.

In all of this, the root of our anxiety is an awareness of our finitude...our awareness of the fact that we won't be around forever. It makes us scared – and that fear becomes the occasion to overreach our boundaries...to over-exercise our freedom. To lead in ways that can be harmful.

¹ Niebuhr, Reinhold, *The Nature and Destiny of Man, Volume 1* (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1964) pp. 178-186. Niebuhr builds upon the thought of Kierkegaard and Augustine.

Leadership in the context of faith demands that we understand this tendency to overreach because we are anxious about not being in charge. And, leadership in the context of faith demands that we spend enough time nurturing our relationship to God so that when we make the decisions that leaders must make, those decisions are informed by what we know of God's vision and values and not simply our own.

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Do you trust in Jesus Christ your Savior, acknowledge him Lord of all and Head of the Church, and through him believe in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?

I want you to look at the back of your bulletin for a moment to read the names of the officers you find there. A little later this morning – at the 11:00 o'clock service – 22 new leaders of this church will answer the question I just asked in the affirmative. This is the first question that the constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) requires every ordained leader to affirm.

You have elected 10 elders and 12 deacons to lead and to serve over the next three years. Within this group of leaders there are stay at home mothers, retirees, bankers, those in the non-profit world, doctors, salesmen, lawyers, accountants, teachers...that is to say, they are a reflection of who we are as a congregation.

The people whom we will ordain and install to leadership in our church are not better than any of the rest of us. They have simply been called upon to lead – and they have said yes to the call. One of the things we believe as Presbyterians is that God is involved in preparing and equipping leaders to serve. That is true within the church as well as in society.

It has yet to be seen how God will use our church's new leaders for God's purpose. Who can know what lies ahead for us as congregation that seeks to be faithful to Christ's call in the center of Charlotte?

What will it mean for us to be Christ body in a downtown that is rapidly growing – mainly with people who are “spiritual but not religious?”

What kind of witness are we called to make – a witness that includes actions that go along with words – in light of the fact that our city suffers more than most from a gap of income inequality and a lack of upward mobility?

How will we respond to the hungers of those – within and outside of our congregation – who crave a connection and a place to belong...which is, at the root, a desire to grow closer in relationship to God?

What will our life look like together – in an age where common ground and common purpose seem to be eroding due to the increased rancor of those on either side of the issues of the day who are convinced that they (and they alone) are right?

Those whom we have elected to lead are called to make faithful choices around these and other questions.

Pray for them.
Speak with them.
Listen to them.

It is their responsibility to lead us in such ways that we do not give into the anxiety that comes when we consider our future, but that we trust God to be faithful as we exercise our ministry and mission as God's people.

This week I re-read a book that has sat on my shelf for a long time. It is a little book written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer about the nature of the church and the nature of leadership within the church. You know Bonhoeffer's story: he was a German seminary professor and pastor who chose to stand in opposition to a Nazi takeover of the church and helped to lead an underground seminary to train pastors in the 1930s and 40s.

Bonhoeffer certainly understood a great deal about anxiety. And he had every reason to worry about the future of the church. He understood the pressures that are associated with leadership – the feeling that it is our job as leaders to secure and fix what we perceive as problems.

But Bonhoeffer also understood his place in the order of things. His words speak to us today like they did 70 years ago. He wrote:

Because God has already laid the foundation of our fellowship, because God has bound us together in one body with other Christians in Jesus Christ, long before we entered into a common life with them, we enter into that common life not as those who demand but as those who thankfully receive.

Christian fellowship is not an ideal which we must realize, it is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate.²

You and I are called into this fellowship.
[You as new officers are called serve in this fellowship]
It is a fellowship created by the God who created heaven and earth.
Ordered by the only Head of the Church – whose life and death give our life and death meaning and purpose.

² Bonhoeffer, Detrich, *Life Together*, p. 28 and p. 30.

It is under the canopy of this grace that we make decisions and exercise our leadership...not just here, but in your home, and your place of work, and your school, and wherever else God calls you to live your life.

So remember – though you may not be in charge – you do belong to the one who is.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.