

FCCS January 25, 2020  
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“When to Follow, When to Lead” Mathew 4:12-23

Today I want to spend some time thinking together about leading and following, following and leading. Although they are not always valued as such, the two are equally important roles; for what is a leader without followers and what leader ought to go on leading endlessly, really?

Particularly in Congregationalism we believe in models of shared leadership, I lead from my area of expertise, you lead when it comes to your area. If someone wants to explore a new aspect of leadership, our job is to follow in a way that helps them to develop and strengthen their vision-knowing full well that when the roles are reversed, they will do the same for us. In churches, we practice leading and following all the time.

I am attracted to the idea of circular leadership and that being in the lead doesn't mean being alone, and it doesn't mean having to be right. Leadership in our context means being curious, inclusive, and willing to follow through. In the UCC and here at FCC we encourage people who are asking provocative questions to take the lead and to guide others on a paths of shared discovery; that is happening right now with a small group of dedicated people who are wondering together what FCC might do to concerning the issue of housing in the valley.

It is also happening with a group that is gathering to envision what land based spiritual practice might look like. These groups are grounded in shared leadership-at some point everyone in the group will be leader and everyone in the group will be a follower. Now, this model works because there is a built-in relationship of trust that has been cultivated over many, many years- even though some of us are newer to it, we benefit from it.

One major challenge facing us on global, national and unfortunately religious level is that we have lost a sense of shared trust. There has been so much dishonestly and betrayal by leadership, we cannot be certain who it safe to follow. As I watch what is playing out in the impeachment hearings, I feel like I'm observing a tennis match where one team is playing with rackets and the other is throwing footballs. We cannot even agree on the ground rules for game- that is how little we trust each other.

Here in Sonoma Valley it is hard to trust that the County Supervisors have a vested interest in our wellbeing. We worry about homelessness, and healthcare; we worry about our schools and the people who run them. For obvious reasons, we are skeptical of leaders who do not share our point of view, but there is a dangerous dynamic at play here. The danger is that the risks associated with leadership are rapidly becoming greater than the rewards of offering one's service. Which means less of the people who we wish to have in charge are willing to sacrifice what it would take to become leaders.

A new study finds that women who are mayors are more than twice as likely as men in the same office to be subjected to psychological abuse and nearly three times as likely to be the victims of physical violence. Researchers surveyed 238 mayors of cities with populations more than 30,000 and found gender, age and city size were all risk factors for abuse and violence, but that being a woman was the only factor associated with increased risk of both physical violence and psychological abuse.

“We’re seeing more women get elected into political office everywhere at the same time that there are increasing threats against all public officials,” Mona Lena Krook, a political science professor at Rutgers University, told The New York Times. “Men also face violence, but women face more, and more types of violence.”

How then are we to create a culture that nurtures new leaders, when the cost of leadership is so great?

Jesus, was a leader who risked everything to stand up for his truth. Today's text finds him fresh off the news of John the Baptist's arrest. Jesus is on the move from one place to another in the face of threatening circumstances- there's even a special word in Greek means to be on the run from threat and it shows up in the book of Mathew a lot. The word is “an-akh-o-reh'-o” That word appears to describe the magi who left Bethlehem by a different route in order to avoid Herod (an-akh-o-reh'-o, 2:12). Jesus' parents (an-akh-o-reh'-o, 2:14) into Egypt after the angel warned them to flee, and they (an-akh-o-reh'-o, 2:22) to Galilee upon their return after a similar such warning. Jesus (an-akh-o-reh'-o, 12:15) from the synagogue after becoming aware of a threat against him by the Pharisees. And after hearing that John has been killed, Jesus (an-akh-o-reh'-o, 14:13) to a deserted place to be alone.

One might surmise that in the face of risky leadership choices God's people run away, which is actually sometimes true. Part of playing the leadership long game is knowing when to play your cards and when to run away.

When the young woman was abducted and raped on her way to Alta Mira Middle School a couple of weeks ago, school principals and guidance counselors reminded us of some very important rules to avoid those whose might have nefarious motives.

Travel on clear well-lit paths.

Take a buddy.

Stay alert, and don't get distracted.

These are not bad spiritual principles as well.

They also say that predators watch for kids who are followers not leaders. It seems being a follower can make one vulnerable, but that's confusing because spiritually we asked to be followers and to make ourselves vulnerable. Heck the way scripture lays it out the disciples have only exchanged a few words with Jesus before walking off into the sunset with a total stranger. In my experience that kind of blind faith is ill advised. Yet, that is what the story tells us- wonder what we are supposed to learn from it?

For starters I feel like there's got defiantly more to the story of Jesus' first followers than what we can see here. I find it kind of impossible to believe that these people who had fished for a living their whole lives, who came from generations of fisher folk, who entire communities relied on for providing sustenance, would just up and walk away when asked by Jesus.

Perhaps this passage is not so much about the fisher's decision to follow Jesus as it is about the kind of people to whom Jesus enjoined himself. Jesus, it appears, did not set out to recruit a team of followers with money, power, or brawn- he wasn't looking for societies A listers. He recruited people who had been followers their whole lives and he taught them to become leaders.

In our lifetimes, haven't most of us been both; follower and leader?

I wonder if we can call to mind following a leader we personally admired? Can we remember who first had faith in us as leaders? I wonder what they risked to support us, to step aside in order that we might have a turn. Are we encouraging others to become leaders and supporting them in the risks that they will take?

We are by Jesus' example encouraged to make bold choices. We are encouraged to follow, when to follow can be frightening. We are encouraged to lead when doing so can be terrifying.

I have heard people say, and I have said so myself, that it can be very discouraging to feel like we are having the same conversation about the environment, racial injustice, and women in leadership that we had twenty even forty years ago. Yes, it can be discouraging, and in addition to being a people who follow and lead we are also called to be a people of faith a people of hope.

Seth Godin puts it this way...

The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. quoted Theodore Parker in saying: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice."

***Friends it's not bending itself. And it's not waiting for someone (out there) to bend it either.***

*It's on us. Even when it doesn't work (yet). Even when it's difficult. Even when it's inconvenient.*

*Our culture is the result of a trillion tiny acts, taken by billions of people, every day. Each of them can seem insignificant, but all of them add up, one way or the other, to the change we each live through.*

*Sometimes it takes a hero like Dr. King to wake us up and remind us of how much power we actually have.*

*And now it's our turn. It always has been.*

Amen