

## **2023 11 05 – Leaders for Peace**

**Scripture: Matthew 23:1-12** (*The Inclusive Bible*)

I have to admit that today's scripture reading is a very difficult one for ministers, pastors and priests to preach. It's too easy for us to put ourselves in the shoes of the religious scholars and Pharisees that Jesus is describing. When he says, "...perform every observance they tell you to. But don't follow their example; even they don't do what they say," Jesus' words can basically knock a preacher down to their knees. Why? Because we all know that there is truth in what he says. None of us consistently follow the advice that we give and some of us fail more often than others. So yes, we recognize our humanity and cringe when our actions don't match our words.

I guess one of the things that makes preachers feel a little better about ourselves is comparing our leadership style to others that we are familiar with: presidents, prime ministers, premiers, corporate executives, movie producers, etc. It's easy and self-satisfying to find examples of arrogant, hypocritical, self aggrandizing leaders in our world. It's easy to identify leaders who seem to care more about power and money than they do about justice and peace. I'm sure we can all come up with a long list of leaders whose integrity we might question.

But just because we can find someone who, we think, is doing a worse job than we are doesn't mean that we should ignore Jesus' call to do better. Jesus tells his disciples that "the greatest among you is one who serves the rest. Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, but those who humble themselves will be

exalted.” So what does it take to be the kind of servant leader that Jesus is calling his disciples, is calling us, to be?

Well, when I am considering questions of leadership and what it means to be a good leader, I often go back to the wisdom of Parker Palmer. Palmer is an American author, educator, and activist who focuses on issues in education, community, leadership, spirituality and social change. One of the issues that he has considered is leadership in times of violence and war. He writes

By violence I mean *any way we have of violating the identity and integrity of another person*. I find this definition helpful because it reveals the critical connections between violent acts large and small—from dropping bombs on civilians halfway around the world to demeaning a child in a classroom. (*A Hidden Wholeness*, 2004, page 169)

Parker Palmer is an advocate of peace and he believes that the secret to a peaceful world is for each one of us to learn how to live non-violent lives. He writes:

The insight at the heart of nonviolence is that we live in a tragic gap—a gap between the way things are and the way we know they might be. It is a gap that never has been and never will be closed. If we want to live nonviolent lives, we must learn to stand in the tragic gap, faithfully holding the tension between reality and possibility in hopes of being opened to a third way. (*A Hidden Wholeness*, 2004, page 175)

Whether we see ourselves as leaders or not, I'm sure we've all found ourselves standing in that gap at different points in our lives. Here's just a few examples:

- When betrayal has taken place in a personal relationship and we are deciding what to do next;
- When we are sitting in a meeting trying to make a decision and it's obvious that people are not coming to an agreement;
- When we know that our congregation will eventually not be able to support our building, but we don't want to let it go.

None of these situations are easy or comfortable. Our natural tendency is always to let go of one of the poles and collapse into the other. In our personal relationship we could decide that separation is the way to go without even trying mediation. In a meeting we might bring the decision to a vote knowing that a minority will be disappointed instead of working towards consensus. In our congregation we might decide to do nothing about the building and just hope that the problem will go away. Parker Palmer would tell us that the better solution is to remain in the tragic gap a little longer—long enough for a third way to become apparent.

One of the examples Palmer gives took place over 20 years ago, but I'm sure all of us remember. He writes:

Sometimes our instinct to resolve tension quickly is played out on a much larger stage. When it became clear what had happened on September 11, 2001, the people of the United States were caught in a tension

between the violence that had been done to us and what we would do in response. Of course, the outcome was never in doubt. We would respond by wreaking violence on the perpetrators—or on stand-ins who could be made to look like the perpetrators—because that is what nation-states do.

But we had an alternative: we might have held that tension longer, allowing it to open us to a more life-giving response. If we had done so, we might have begun to understand that the terror Americans felt on September 11 is the daily fare of a great many people around the world. That insight might have helped us become more compassionate and responsible citizens of the international community, altering some of our national policies and practices that contribute to the terror felt daily by people in distant lands. And those actions might have made the world a safer place for everyone, including us. (*A Hidden Wholeness*, 2004, page 176)

So why don't we stand longer in that tragic gap? Why do we, why do our leaders, often let the gap collapse and choose to live with current reality or fantasy rather than looking for a better solution? Palmer argues that what drives us to a quick resolution is fear, fear that if we hold the tension too long, it will break our hearts. Now that fear may show up as arrogance, pride, ego or some other negative character trait, but in reality it is just fear, fear of a broken heart.

But according to Palmer, a broken heart is not always a bad thing. Again, he writes:

But there are two ways to understand what it means to have our hearts broken. One is to imagine the heart broken into shards and scattered about—a feeling most of us know, and a fate we would like to avoid. The other is to imagine the heart broken into a new capacity—a process that is not without pain but one that many of us would welcome. As I stand in the tragic gap between reality and possibility, this small, tight fist of a thing called my heart can break open into greater capacity to hold more of my own and the world's suffering and joy, despair and hope. (*A Hidden Wholeness*, 2004, page 178)

A servant leader, a leader with integrity, a leader for peace is someone who has the courage to stand in the tragic gap, and to help others stand in that gap with them. Think of parents who are holding the tension between their hopes for their teenage child and what is currently happening in that child's life. Think of leaders like Nelson Mandela, the Dalai Lama, and Martin Luther King Jr. and how they held that tension between reality and possibility their entire lives.

May we all find the strength to stand in the tragic gap between reality and possibility. May we all find the courage to have our hearts broken open. May we all become leaders for peace. May it be so. Amen.