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November 25, 2018

“Leadership Training”

Luke 4: 1-20

Today is Reign of Christ Sunday. On the liturgical calendar, it signifies the end of “Ordinary Time” before the calendar cycle begins again with Advent and the telling of Jesus’ birth. On this Sunday we celebrate Christ's role as Lord of all—leader of the world, the church, and our lives.

On this day, the scriptures we are encouraged to focus on from the lectionary typically come from the end of Jesus’ life, where He triumphs over the sins of this world and finds His ultimate victory on the cross.

And while those are worthwhile scriptures to read, today, I wanted to focus on the beginning of Jesus’ role as a leader. If today is the day when we celebrate Jesus as the leader of the world, the church, and our lives, we should look at how that all began. Therefore, our scripture this morning comes from the Gospel of Luke 4:1-20 and takes place moments after Jesus was baptized:

¹Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, ² where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. ³ The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” ⁴ Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’”

⁵ Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶ And the devil said to him, “To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. ⁷ If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” ⁸ Jesus answered him, “It is written,

‘Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.’”

⁹ Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, ¹⁰ for it is written,

‘He will command his angels concerning you,
to protect you,’

¹¹ and

‘On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”

¹² Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” ¹³ When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

¹⁴ Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵ He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

¹⁶ When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸ “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

²⁰ And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.

I’ve been thinking about this scripture for a while, ever since I recently participated in a week-long leadership training, offered by the Gamaliel Network. Named after the Jewish rabbi who taught the apostle Paul, the mission of the Gamaliel Network, is to empower ordinary people to effectively participate in the political, environmental, social, and economic decisions affecting their lives. It is a faith-based network whose faith calls its members to pursue equal opportunity for all, shared abundance, and stronger, more prosperous communities. Sounds a lot like following the gospel!

But in popular culture we would call this type of leadership training “Community Organizing 101.” That’s really what the training is designed to prepare one to do. If you ever read Barack Obama’s first book, *Dreams from my Father*, and you remember the part where he became a community organizer on the Southside of Chicago which led to his deeper involvement in politics, well the Gamaliel Network is the group that trained him to be an organizer! Just a small claim to fame...

On the first day of the training we were asked to close our eyes and think of someone who we personally consider a leader. Someone whose leadership we have followed in our own lives. We were asked to think about attributes of this person and what words we would use to describe them. When we all had selected someone, we were asked to share a story about how we came to be followers of that leader.

Interestingly enough, in a room of about 25 people, at least a third of whom were pastors, and most everyone else identifying as a Christian, *no one* selected Jesus Christ as their example of a leader-- except our facilitator! And to explain why and set the stage for the remainder of what we would be learning that week, she retold the story of the devil trying unsuccessfully to mobilize Jesus to his cause in this scripture.

She began by telling us that some people—like Jesus--- lead through love, and others—like the devil-- lead though guns, butter, and magic.

Butter. Guns. Magic. Those are...unusual analogies perhaps, but they make sense! Bribes of material wealth and creature comforts (butter), military power (guns), and promises of miracles (magic) are all tools that some leaders employ to mobilize people into following their leadership.

We see it as soon as Jesus makes the commitment to follow God through the act of baptism. The text says that Jesus is out there alone, not eating anything, and trying to follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit. And there the devil is to offer him another choice. He says: “Since you are the Son of God, turn this stone into bread and stop being hungry” or in other words, “listen to me and have all the material comforts you want.”

Next, the devil takes Jesus high above the wilderness and shows him all the kingdoms of the earth. The devil promises Jesus that if he submits to his authority, the devil will make Jesus the head of all these kingdoms to rule command any way he sees fit.

And lastly while on top of the Temple in Jerusalem, the devil tempts Jesus with special powers. He says: “jump off the top of the Temple and I promise you that angels will miraculously catch you and protect you from harm.”

Jesus stayed true to God and denied submitting to the devil’s tests, but that probably wasn’t very easy. Every day people are drawn to follow leaders who offer them a fast track to wealth, power over others, and promises that something special will happen to them if they submit. These are tried and true temptations that people face every day in a variety of ways. And I’m not just talking about the obvious examples, like a prosperity gospel televangelist who says that if you call a 1-800 number and donate to their ministry in the next 5 minutes, God will reward you with a house and a car and good health.

Temptation away from acting out of love can be much more subtle; like going to a program at church that you’re not really interested in but they’re serving pizza and you don’t want to fix dinner that night; or hanging out with a group of bullies because they pick on other people instead of you.

Every morning when we wake up and go out into the wilderness that is our world, one of the things we can be sure of is that the devil is alive and never passes on an opportunity to remind us of how hard it is to be human. Everyday something somewhere reminds us of how lonely, hungry, broke, and powerless we are on this earth. But if the devil is showing us what it means to be human, then Jesus’ response to the devil shows us what it means to be of God.

After the devil tempts him with promises of food, power, and miracles, Jesus quotes scripture from the Torah, reminding the devil that no one lives on bread alone, and that his purpose in life was to serve God, not test God.

You see, Jesus knew who he was—or in organizer speak—he had understood his self-interest. As the Son of God, Jesus understood what impact he wanted to have on the world and why. He understood that he was meant to challenge the systems and structures of the Powers that Be so that all could live freely in God.

We see this right after he leaves the wilderness for Nazareth. Jesus doesn't miss a beat and goes straight to the synagogue to preach, choosing a well-known text from the prophet Isaiah, which reads like Jesus' personal mission statement:

*“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”*

When I say that Jesus was clear about his “self-interest” that is not to be confused with *selfish* interests. It's not asking: “what's in this work for me *and only me*” but rather “how can I be my best self among others?” and “how can I work toward my own liberation *and* that of others?” These are important questions for all of us to consider, especially as we prepare for the start of another church year together.

Who are we?

What happened to us in the past that made us who we are today?

Are we living into who we feel we were called to be, or do we feel like we could be something greater?

Looking back over some church documents, I found a copies of past mission statements and vision statements we have written for this congregation. All are similar in philosophy and character. One version of our vision statement—which states who we want to be in the future--reads like this:

Little River United Church of Christ is recognized in the denomination and the community as a vibrant center of spiritual growth and ministry manifesting the teaching of Jesus. We provide leadership in building community, promoting social reconciliation, and seeking justice for all. Our worship, educational, and social programs nurture and challenge our diverse membership to spiritual and intellectual growth.

What I like about this vision statement is that it clearly recognizes Jesus Christ as our teacher and leader, and it's clear about what we want to be in the world. We want to provide leadership in building community, promoting social reconciliation, and seeking justice for all. *That's a lot!* And it's like the mission statement Jesus lays out for himself, but if we're not careful, these nice words will stay nice words and won't push us to be something greater.

Thinking about Jesus' call to bring good news to the poor and oppressed, and the vision we've laid out for this congregation we must ask ourselves: are we content with periodically restocking our food pantry, or do we want to organize around addressing the root causes of food insecurity in Fairfax County?

Likewise, thinking about Jesus' call to proclaim release the captives, and reflecting on our vision to seek justice for all, are we content to collect books for children whose parents are incarcerated, or do we want to work toward building a more just justice system?

There are no right or wrong answers to these questions—just honest answers. And let me be clear - charity is not a bad thing. It's necessary in many situations, as we all know, and is an important part of the Christian tradition. *But if we claim to want to be more, to be something greater, then we must figure out why going above and beyond charity is important to us.* And this has to be more than an intellectual exercise. We have to discern our self-interest beyond progressive ideals and liberal politics.

Taking a lesson from Jesus' early ministry and the scripture from today, we need to be able to boldly and confidently proclaim who we are as followers of Jesus Christ so that when we are tested and tempted by the devil to abandon what Jesus taught us, we will be strong enough, organized enough, and committed enough not to give into temptation.

I mentioned how in the leadership visioning exercise no one in my group chose Jesus as a leader they admire. Interestingly enough, no one chose anyone in their churches either. No pastor, no deacon, no justice team member. I don't know, maybe we were all just focused on choosing someone with name recognition—which again doesn't explain why no one chose Jesus—but it might say something about us and what we haven't yet built in our own congregations.

I'm still processing a lot of what I experienced at this training, but I know I want to be something greater. And on this Reign of Christ Sunday, I pray that we all might know the hope God is calling is to.

Amen.