

Loving Leaders

1 Peter 5:1-4; Galatians 5:22-23

We are beginning a series from now to Lent on the Fruit of the Spirit. The first in that list of nine fruit is love. As I thought about that, and about today's ordination and installation of officers, I want to kind of tie the two together.

As we focus this year on the concept of the Apostles and especially on Paul, I want to look at what both Paul and Peter said about church leaders. And what they said about being loving people. Paul had a great deal to say about love, especially in the famous love chapter of 1 Corinthians 13. If you're familiar with that chapter, you will remember that he closes it saying: "these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love."

Let's look first at what Peter says to the Elders of the church – every church in every age. The first thing of which Peter reminds the church leaders is that their job is to care for the flock. That in itself is a huge job, especially in a large church like ours. There is so much that needs to be done to "care for the flock," that a whole range of ministerial duties are required. And, for the Deacons, primarily caring for the physical needs of the flock. For when he says "care for," Peter is not only talking about making sure that the church members are cared for in the physical sense, but also in the spiritual sense. The church leadership must see to it that your needs are met.

Sometimes that may mean being there for you and with you when you are going through a difficult time or struggling with a particular temptation. It may mean helping you find a Bible study group that meets your particular needs. Let us know what you need. I can't promise that we will do everything you ask, as our resources are limited. But we will do the best we can to help as many of you as we can, grow in your faith and your knowledge of God's Word.

When caring for the flock, we must all participate to a certain degree. It is important to help make members and visitors alike feel welcome and wanted. I read a true story from some years back about a particular church where they got this one mixed up with disastrous results. The pastor shared with the congregation as follows:

"Remember last year when the Browns came forward to join the church?" he asked. Everyone nodded; the Browns were a very influential family. "Well, the same day a young man came forward and gave his life to Christ. I could tell he needed help—and we counseled him." No one nodded; no one remembered him. "We worked with the Browns, got them onto committees. They've been wonderful folks," the pastor said to muffled amens. "The young man...well, we lost track. Until yesterday, that is, as I was preparing today's message on the Good Samaritan. I picked up the paper, and there was that young man's picture. He had been arrested for committing a terrible crime." It is essential that we care for the whole flock, discerning their individual needs and abilities and helping them grow in the Lord and in their service to Him.

One last point in caring for the flock is to remind all of you that you have a responsibility to care for others in the flock, even if you are not serving on a board. If you learn of a need, you can

meet that quietly and confidentially or you can contact Jim or me and let us know that help is needed. If it is someone in your Shepherd Group, contact your Deacon and talk with them about how to meet that need. The Bible says, “Bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ.”

Peter says that when you are called to serve in the life of a church, it needs to be done willingly. He says, “Watch over the flock willingly, not grudgingly....”

Rick Warren says, “True servants think of ministry as an opportunity, not an obligation. They ‘Serve the Lord with gladness.’ Why do they serve with gladness? Because they love the Lord, and are grateful for his grace. They know serving is the highest use of life, and they know God has promised a reward. Jesus promised ‘The Father will honor and reward anyone who serves me.’ The Bible also says, ‘He will not forget how hard you have worked for him and how you have shown your love to him by caring for other Christians.’”

Those to whom you minister may not always perfectly understand what you say, but they will soon know whether you love them or not. The secret of many a successful Christian worker is not that he/she is skilled, or knowledgeable, or has cultivated their fruit of the Spirit more fully. The secret is that those to whom they minister know that they really care about them. Caring not in some abstract way, or from sense of duty, but wanting with all his/her heart the best that God wants for them. That, you see, is serving willingly – simply wanting the best for those whom you serve.

What the real need in the life of the church today is people whom the Holy Spirit can use — people of prayer, mighty in prayer. So all of you need to be in prayer for your Elders and Deacons, Pastors and staff, as well as yourself. Ask God to give clear guidance to our church leaders and to open your mind to know what He wants you to do in the life of the church.

The third thing Peter tells the leaders about is to not “Lord it over the people assigned to your care, but lead them by your good example.”

General Eisenhower used to demonstrate the art of leadership with a simple piece of string. He’d put it on a table and say: “Pull it and it’ll follow wherever you wish. Push it and it will go nowhere at all.” I would remind the Elders and Deacons that leadership does not evolve from demanding that others do that which you yourself are not willing to do. When a Christian leader looks for role models, he/she need only look to our Leader, Jesus Christ. Here was a man who stood for His principles. Here was a man who made tough decisions. Yet here was a man who clearly modeled the servant-leader style. We are told that one of His final acts before going to the cross was to wash the grimy feet of His disciples – including Judas. Then He said to them, “Since I, the Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash each other’s feet.” (John 13:14 LB) That is a true servant, one who is willing to wash the feet of those he knows may let him down. That is true love as Paul defines it.

Paul wrote to the Colossian church: “We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all his people—the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true word of the gospel that has come to you. In the same way, the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world— just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God’s grace. You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, and who also told us of your love in the Spirit.” (Colossians 1:3-8 TNIV)

There are several points I want to make from Paul’s words about Epaphras. First, Paul says he is a “dear fellow servant.” Whatever capacity you serve in the life of the church, may the people you serve refer to you as dear; or beloved, as other versions call it. Those of you who have been ordained, or are about to be ordained, may recall that one of the ordination vows says, “Will you seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love?” Please remember, that whether you serve on the Session or the Deacons, all four of those qualities will be needed in great supply.

Paul also calls Epaphras a “faithful minister.” Friends, I hope you will be calling your elders and deacons faithful. They will give a great deal of time and energy to the work to which you have called them. They will need your support and encouragement.

Paul closes this section with a very telling comment. He says, Epaphras “told us of your love in the Spirit.” What a powerful statement about a group of Christians! As you serve in the life of the church, work extra hard at showing the love of God to others. There is nothing that shares the Gospel message more powerfully than that. I know it’s not always easy to love others. Some people are just plain hard to love. But when you do show the love of God to someone else, it speaks volumes about the church and about your faith and your calling. So get busy practicing that kind of self-giving love on one another. Then, when you are out in the community or at work or at school or on vacation, show that love to others. That will open the door to tell them about your faith in Jesus and to invite them to church.

Ezra Earl Jones has said, “Leaders do not have to be the greatest visionaries themselves. The vision may come from anyone. The leaders do have to state the vision, however. Leaders also have to keep the vision before the people and remind them of the progress that is being made to achieve the vision. Otherwise, the people might assume that they are failing and give up.”

As Christian leaders, we face many awful and embarrassing messes. Our people may often let us down. But Jesus has already shown us what we must do in that situation: We are to love those people anyhow, then forgive them and love them some more. Remember how, three times, Peter denied that he even knew Jesus. Following the resurrection, Jesus came to Peter and forgave him three times. Three times Jesus gave Peter the opportunity to express his love for this wonderful leader whom he had followed for three years. That is why Peter can write such encouraging words to us about being leaders in the life of the church.

God trains us in ways unique to us to fulfill unique purposes. So this morning I challenge all of you to join us on this mission and see where God is leading us as a church. I challenge you in the leadership positions of Elder and Deacon to fervently seek God's guidance and to prayerfully lead with a Godly vision and a loving heart. To the rest of the congregation, I challenge you, to support, pray for, and offer your help so that the work of God can be a great thing in this place.

I want to close with two quotes from the Apostle Paul: "For a time is coming when people will no longer listen to sound and wholesome teaching. They will follow their own desires and will look for teachers who will tell them whatever their itching ears want to hear. They will reject the truth and chase after myths. But you should keep a clear mind in every situation. Don't be afraid of suffering for the Lord. Work at telling others the Good News, and fully carry out the ministry God has given you." (2 Timothy 4:3-5 NLT)

The second passage reminds you how to work together to accomplish what God wants you to do. Paul writes to the Ephesians, "Always be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other's faults because of your love. Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace. For there is one body and one Spirit, just as you have been called to one glorious hope for the future. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father, who is over all and in all and living through all." (Ephesians 4:2-6 NLT)

And Peter tells us the reward is wonderful: "When the Head Shepherd comes, your reward will be a never-ending share in his glory and honor." (1 Peter 5:4 LB)

Prayer