**Leadership as Spiritual Practice** Rev. Dr. Scott M. Kenefake
Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Tim The House of Hope Presbyterian Church Exodus 3:1-15; Romans 12:9-21 Saint Paul, Minnesota
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Like many of you, I found myself in several airports in recent months—many of which have been recently renovated. But a mainstay of the contemporary airport experience is the ubiquity of *business books* in gift shops and bookstores—they are almost always displayed *“front and center”* in these shops to catch the attention of business travelers who are looking to improve their *sales, management, or leadership skills.*

Here is a list of the current top 10 best sellers from the *New York Times:*

* Atomic Habits: Tiny Changes, Remarkable Results, James Clear
* The Creative Act: A Way of Being, Rick Rubin with Neil Straus
* I Will Teach You to be Rich: No Guilt. No Excuses. Just a 6-Week Program That Works, Ramit Sethi
* Four Thousand Weeks: Time Management for Mortals, Oliver Burkeman
* Dare to Lead: Brave Work. Tough Conversations. Whole Hearts, Brene Brown
* Easy Money: Cryptocurrency, Casino Capitalism, and the Golden Age of Fraud, Ben McKenzie with Jacob Silverman
* Outliers: the Story of Success, Malcolm Gladwell
* Thinking Fast and Slow, Daniel Kahneman
* Poverty, By America, Matthew Desmond
* The Wisdom of the Bullfrog: Leadership Made Simple (But Not Easy), Admiral William H. McRaven, U.S. Navy Retired

But for today’s sermon, I’m most interested in the books that focus on the question of *leadership* because our understanding of the personal qualities that are needed for effective leadership (in organizations of all kinds—both secular and religious) *in the early decades of the 21st century* are quite different from what they were *in the last decades of the 20th century.*

According to the *Harvard Business Review:*

*“The command-and-control management style has been on the decline for decades. Research has shown that companies perform better when leaders empower, encourage, and coach employees instead of delivering orders, micromanaging, and meting out discipline.”[[1]](#footnote-1)*

Empower, encourage, coach. (I’ll come back to these words later!)

Leadership, of course, is all the rage at universities these days. There are courses in *micro*-leadership and *macro*-leadership, leadership *skills* and leadership *techniques.* There are professors of leadership (some of them calling to mind the old adage *“Those who can, do, those who can’t teach”)* and *institutes* of leadership.

Students generally flock to these courses. After all, *who among us doesn’t like to think of himself or herself as a potential leader?[[2]](#footnote-2)*

But the question for us is this: *Is leadership, specifically leadership in the church, a spiritual practice?*

Dorothy Bass has defined *practices* as *“those shared activities that address fundamental human needs and that, woven together, form a way of life.”* Does leadership address a fundamental human need?

Effective leaders, you see, engage communities, congregations, and institutions in addressing their most difficult and pressing problems, and mobilize those organizations to address their most important challenges. In these ways leadership does address a fundamental human need—*our need to respond to challenges.* When no person or team of persons provides leadership, communities and congregations are disabled.

Craig Dykstra adds, *“Practices are those cooperative human activities through which we, as individuals and communities, grow and develop in moral character and substance.”* If leadership is a practice, then it forms not only those who are led, but also those who lead.

In other words, leadership in the church addresses fundamental human needs and shapes moral character. This kind of leadership is not easy; it’s a *high-risk* and often dangerous endeavor. As Ron Heifetz of Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government observes, *“You appear dangerous to people when you question their values, beliefs, and habits of a lifetime. You place yourself on the line when you tell people what they need to hear rather than what they want to hear. Although you may see with clarity and passion a promising future of progress and gain, people will see with equal passion the losses you ask them to sustain.”*

According to Anthony Robinson, *“True leadership does not simply influence the community to follow the leader’s vision, but also enables the community to face its most critical challenges and to be what God calls and enables it to be. There is too much stress today on the leader as the person of vision. A vision is not imported from somewhere else, and it is not the idiosyncratic vision of one charismatic woman or man. A vision arises from a careful reading of the context and the work required by God of a particular people with a particular identity.”[[3]](#footnote-3)*

Let’s think about these things in terms of the *leadership example of Moses* in our text from Exodus 3 this morning.

You see, Moses exemplifies *leadership as a spiritual practice* when he mobilizes a people to engage in its most pressing and difficult challenges. For example, he led a journey of *“adaptive change,”* to use Heifetz’s term—a journey that involves loss and risk, change of hearts and minds, loss of known worlds and ways, and an introduction to the unknown. The journey also requires *trust* in powers beyond one’s own. The resulting transformation is intrinsically spiritual in nature: *it requires spiritual leadership.*

But note that *leadership* is not the same as *expertise,* although the two are often confused. *Experts* come equipped with a variety of technical fixes and new tools. These are fine as far as they go, but they don’t engage people in *loss, risk, and trust.* In fact, people may try to avoid the challenge of the more difficult work by preoccupying themselves with the latest in tools and techniques. Experts *do things for us;* leaders *go with us.*

Several episodes from the Moses story illustrate different aspects of leadership as a spiritual practice.

First, Moses said, *“I must turn aside and look at this great sight and see why the bush is not burned up”* (Ex. 3:3). This, of course, is part of the story of Moses’ initial encounter with God at the burning bush and God’s call to him. Heifetz says that leaders need to *“get to the balcony.”* Perhaps it seems a little pedestrian to describe the burning-bush moment as *“getting to the balcony,”* but Heifetz means that Moses had to *step away* in order to get a better look at things. In fact, Moses had stepped away, far away, to Midian. In Exodus 3, he was summoned *“to the balcony”* for a better look at what was going on back in Egypt.

Congregational leaders who are caught up in the close encounter of congregational life need to step away in order to see more clearly what is really going on, including their role in things. Doing so is not without risk. Moses began to see what God was doing in and through what appeared an utterly hopeless situation.

Next, Moses was *called* to *leadership.* Moses had tried leadership before, jumping into the fray when he saw one of the Hebrew slaves being abused by an Egyptian overlord. But this brief and inglorious fling was leadership *by his own power;* it was of this world. Now Moses received authorization for his leadership. It lay not in himself, *but in God and God’s call.* This work was not his idea. Or as Jesus put it to his own disciples, *“You did not choose me, but I chose you.”*

With the people mobilized and the Red Sea behind them, the real work began. Moses said, *“When the Lord gives you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning, because the Lord has heard the complaining that you utter against him—what are we? Your complaint is not against us but against the Lord”* (Ex. 16:8).

The people, you see, had complained against Moses and Aaron, saying, *“You have brought us out here to kill us.”* This was a wonderful moment, one that anyone leading change will recognize. Not only have we heard the complaint from our people, but we have also spoken it ourselves, if only in our own hearts and minds. *“Why not leave well enough alone?” “What if they’re right?”*

To his credit, Moses worked to keep the *real issues* before the people and to keep himself from becoming the issue. Another way to put this is to say that Moses did not *internalize* the struggle. Some of the people wanted to make his leadership the issue. There are times, of course, when leaders are misguided or manipulative and need correction. But the real issue—*the adaptive work*—is learning to trust in God’s leading and God’s power to sustain God’s people. Again and again, Moses framed and named what was really at stake, and it wasn’t food or his leadership*. It was learning faith and learning this God.*

In Heifetz’s terms, Moses maintained *“disciplined attention”* and resisted *the “work avoidance”* of the murmuring people, the tried-and-true gambit of blaming the leader. Moses does not allow himself or them to fall into that trap, but named it, then drew attention to the real work and the real issues*. “Your murmurings are not against us but against the Lord,”* he said. That language can, of course, be misused, either to stigmatize or to induce guilt. With those dangers in view, leaders must keep the greater issues before the group and not take murmuring personally, even when some want to make it personal. Moses did not internalize the conflict and resistance that came his way. It was not about him, but about God and God’s plan to create a people who know and serve God.

Then, in the very next chapter of Exodus, the people complained about the lack of water. Again, Moses directed their attention away from himself and toward God. And God responded by putting Moses on the spot.

*“Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink”* (Ex. 17:6). In this story two related elements of leadership as a spiritual practice are evident: *first,* leaders lead. At some point and at some times, leaders must be willing to step ahead, to take risks and to lead. In Exodus 17 we see Moses not only engaging in the risk of leadership, but also holding steady despite increasing resistance. After all, what could be riskier than striking a stone in the desert with the expectation that water would flow from it?

This is a powerful metaphor for holding steady amid rising resistance. The value of persistence as a quality of leadership cannot be overestimated. Most social communities will test leaders to see if they mean what they say, to see if they will hold steady, not losing their nerve or their cool. When congregations and communities sense that a leader will persist, then something shifts, and the next steps are possible.

Finally, at the end of Deuteronomy, after Moses’ long exhortation to the children of Israel at the boundary of the Promised Land, he climbed Mt. Nebo to see the Promised Land from a distance. That was as close as he would ever get. The text records, *“Then Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in the land of Moab, at the Lord’s command. He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no one knows his burial place to this day”* (Deut. 34:6).

What a strange and haunting ending to such a long and glorious story! Moses was not allowed to enter the Promised Land. But this gets to the very heart of leadership as a spiritual practice: *it is not about the leader.* We may lead for a chapter, but the story is God’s.

People are drawn to leadership roles, in part, because they hope for admiration, affection and attention, if not validation. If we do actually lead, however, we soon learn that this is *not* what we get. Leadership is, as Wendell Berry said about parenting, *“a vexed privilege and a blessed trial.”*

It is in this way, however, that leadership is most of all a spiritual practice. Leadership requires a transformation, a dying to the self. *“It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me”* (Gal. 2:20). It is not about you or me. It is about the work. *And, for us (in the church), it is about God and God’s dream.*

And so, in a way, Moses seemed to intuitively understand (as many contemporary leaders do—whether they have read all of the recent books on leadership or not) that leadership is mostly about *empowering, encouraging, and coaching.*

Friends, as a spiritual practice, leadership is as demanding as any other, and yet as promising and transformative as well. It is important work. Leadership addresses a fundamental human need: the need of communities, congregations, and institutions to address the pressing problems and challenges occasioned by change in the environment and culture. Leadership helps people to discern both new occasions and new duties. And leadership is a practice which can shape moral character and deepen personal substance. Leadership is good and godly work.[[4]](#footnote-4)

1. Julia DiGangi, *The Anxious Micro-Manager:* *Why some leaders become too controlling and how they find the right balance , Harvard Business Review, September-October 2023* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. William H. Willimon, *Back to the Burning Bush: Leadership 101,* The Christian Century, April 24, 2002 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Anthony B. Robinson, *Give and Take: Leadership as a Spiritual Practice,* The Christian Century, October 4, 2005 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)