

January 20, 2019 (Ordination Sunday)

“Healthy Leadership”

Mark 1:33-38, 1 Samuel 17:38-45, Psalm 139:13-16

Almost everyone – inside and outside the Church – would say Jesus was a great leader. If we polled those inside the Church, David – as flawed as he was – would probably make everyone’s Top 5 list; maybe their Top 3. What is it in these two (especially in these passages) that exudes health? Doesn’t it feel like they just know who they are? And who they are NOT?

As you probably know, we are starting up another round of our Emotionally Healthy Spirituality courses. These three passages (1 Samuel 17, Psalm 139, and Mark 1) are all Daily Readings in our Day By Day devotional – a key component of the discovery that happens throughout the 8 weeks. To be more specific they are the first three readings in Week #2, which is called “Know Yourself That You May Know God.” Being “healthy” is a byproduct of knowing God and knowing ourselves. John Calvin said that both were vital and interrelated in the introduction to his massive *Institutes* back in the 16th century. Somehow we sort of forgot this along the way.

Do you know yourself? Do I know myself? And how does the answer to that question impact our relationship with God, and others?

I love the story of David and Goliath on so many levels. What I really love is this moment when Saul puts his armor on David and it’s just not working. “. . . and [David] tried in vain to walk, for he was not used to them. Then David said to Saul, ‘I cannot walk with these; for I am not used to them [they don’t fit me].’ So David removed them.” (1 Samuel 17:39)

Too many people in life and in leadership are walking around in ‘armor’ or ‘uniforms’ that simply don’t fit them. And too many people are trying to do/offer something they have never been asked to do/offer, with gifts, abilities, and passions they do not possess. And that’s a problem. It’s a recipe for disaster.

In his book *Let Your Life Speak*, educator and Quaker, Parker Palmer reminds us, “When I give something I do not possess, I give a false and dangerous gift, a gift that looks like love but is, in reality, loveless – a gift given more from my need to prove myself than from the other’s need to be cared for . . . One sign that I am violating my own nature in the name of nobility is a condition called burnout. Though usually regarded as the result of trying to give too much, burnout in my experience results from trying to give what I do not possess – the ultimate in giving too little! Burnout is a state of emptiness, to be sure, but it does not result from giving all I have; it merely reveals the nothingness from which I was trying to give in the first place.” (Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak*)

If David had walked around in Saul's oversized armor for 5-10 more minutes he would have been both exhausted and defeated. If Jesus healed each and every person in the crowd who kept showing up wherever He went, He wouldn't have had the time, focus, or energy to do what He was sent to do. If any of us attempt to carry out ministry without knowing who we are uniquely, or try to fulfill someone else's role, or are mostly concerned with meeting the expectations of others, we're doomed . . . and many will be taken out in the process.

Who are we really? How well do you and I know ourselves and the God who put us together? What is God asking you and me to lead and lend of ourselves for His great Kingdom enterprise?

David seemed to know who he was and Who it was that put him together. "O Lord, You have searched me and known me . . . it was You who formed my inward parts; You knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise You for I am fearfully and wonderfully made." (Psalm 139:1, 13-14) Our kids are learning Psalm 139 this month in Grace Place. This is so foundational to our self-understanding: "We are fearfully and wonderfully made." God has designed us in specific ways for specific purposes; but none of us are meant to do everything, nor should we try. At First Pres, we're committed to helping people discover their unique design, as well as acknowledge their limits.

Here is where it gets a little tricky. Not only must we find and live into our God-given identity; we must also come to terms with this reality: We have been confused about who we are, deceived about our identity, had God's stamp of approval on us damaged in an endless number of ways, taken off His robes of righteousness and put on the clothes/armor suggested by others – who barely know us. And that deception and confusion and scarring is so hard to notice and name. So often, this brokenness and pain and deception is out of our line of sight. But it impacts everything we do. FPC wants to help you discover that you are "fearfully and wonderfully made" AND we want you to discover the difficult stuff too.

What I think makes Emotionally Healthy Spirituality so helpful, and so scary, is its focus on helping people discover what's below the surface and out of sight. The metaphor of an ICEBERG permeates the book and workbook and video segments. So much of who we are lies below the surface and goes unnoticed and unnamed. But what's below the surface significantly impacts our relationships with God and others; our leadership and ministry.

Our Nominating Team – tasked with helping us discern future elders and deacons – asks "Does he/she know their giftedness and passions?" when thinking about who God might be calling into leadership. More and more we are asking "Do they know themselves?" "Are they able to see below the surface of their lives?" "Are they growing in self-awareness?" "Will they be comfortable with waiting, stillness, silence, and honest conversations?"

I want to be clear we are not looking for leaders who are perfectly healthy and nearly finished products. We don't think people like that exist. None of us has it all figured out or is all put together. In fact, a better qualification for leadership in the Church is "Do we know we are messed up, and are we willing to lead with a limp?" "Have we looked below the surface?" "Are we willing to grow in our emotional and spiritual health from wherever we are to wherever God is leading us?"

Growth/Health/Spiritual Maturity is a tricky thing. For most of my life I have been stuck thinking that maturity/growth/spiritual health was something best measured in a linear way. We are either moving away from our brokenness toward healing and victory, stuck, or headed back to the starting line. If we bump up against the same things that tripped us up in the past, we must be back to square one; we must not have grown at all. When it comes to discipleship, linear thinking can be so discouraging.

It wasn't until I was 50 – on sabbatical and hiking 14ers with a friend – that I was introduced to the idea that growth is more of a spiral than a straight line. Even as we grow, we continue to bump up against some of the same issues and baggage and scars. The issues and baggage used to lie below the surface; and because we were completely unaware they completely paralyzed us. But as we look below the surface, deal with the dysfunction and unhealthy patterns picked up in our families, get honest about our emotions and grief and limits, stop running from everyone and everything, and learn to be still before God (EHS covers all of this ground), we'll find that – though we still run into the same struggles and feel some of the same hurts surfacing – we're actually further along on the journey than we might feel. We're not back at square one. We aren't paralyzed. We are moving through the mess and recovering more quickly. Same struggle but we're farther along.

But all that begins with asking God and others to help us discover what's below the surface – the things that confuse us, the scars and brokenness. And that is never easy. We tend to think we see 90% of who we are with maybe 10% eluding us. It's probably the other way around; which means we need a LOT of help. The Good News is that God has a LOT of help for us. EHS will help you on that journey. So will a good therapist. So will an honest friend. But I cannot emphasize enough how easy it is to deceive ourselves that not much lies below the surface. Trust me, I know . . .

I had just enough counseling when I was 23 and took just enough Pastoral Care classes in seminary and exposed myself to just enough good Men's Ministry curriculum to think I had discovered about 90% of what was below the surface of my life. I even read Pete Scazzero's book, preached sermons on it, and went to his workshop in Queens, NY.

And then (as I was approaching 50) through a series of conversations and experiences only God could have orchestrated, God started getting my attention. Why can't I take a full day off? Why do I bury and refuse to process negative emotions? Why is it still hard to communicate in deeply emotional ways with the people I love the most? Why do I run from conflict? Why do I still feel an ache from my father's death?

It turns out that only half of my actual life was above the surface . . . if that. There was still a bunch that was eluding me; and making me an unhealthy leader. Taking a real sabbath helped. Going on a retreat put on by our denomination's health care plan helped (even though I didn't think I really needed it). Listening to John Eldredge at Canyonview Vineyard one Saturday helped. Hitting a wall in my leadership here helped. Getting a sabbatical (and preparing for over a year with a team of people) helped . . . a ton. Therapy for 9 months afterward helped. Beginning to do spiritual discernment with the elders, staff, and leaders of this church helped. And going through EHS as a participant (not a leader) at First Methodist a year ago helped a **ton**. Is 70% of my life above the surface now? I'm just healthy enough to know maybe 70% is still below the surface. I've got a long way to go before I'm as emotionally healthy as Jesus.

And, oh, was He healthy. He had nothing below the surface. Nothing in the dark. No brokenness or scars or baggage or Father Wound. And that made all the difference in His leadership. Mark tells us, "In the morning, while it was still very dark, He got up and went out to a deserted place, and there He prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for Him. When they found Him, they said to Him, 'Everyone is searching for You.' He answered, 'Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.' " (Mark 1:35-38)

Jesus knew who He was, why He came, and what He needed to do – and NOT do. He would not be swayed by the crowds or the expectations of those closest to Him. He came to do more than heal – although the Good News of the Kingdom includes healing of all kinds. He'd get a lot more applause for sticking to the healing stuff. It really did draw a crowd. But He wasn't trying to please anyone, and He wasn't running from anything in His past, and He wasn't afraid of conflict and hard conversations, and He didn't shy away from deep emotion, and He loved being alone, still before God in prayer. He was an emotionally healthy leader and wanted His followers to become more and more like Him.

What do you think? Are you up for looking below the surface to see what's there? Or what's still there? Do you need more space in your life and a freer relationship with God and others to help you discover what might be there?