

June 7, 2020

"Simon Says: Lead Humbly"

1 Peter 5:1-14

### **Oh how we need leadership!**

When you think of great leadership in the past, who comes to mind?

Abraham Lincoln. Margaret Thatcher. Martin Luther King Jr. William Wilberforce. Condoleezza Rice. Colin Powell. Madeline Albright. Frederick Douglas. FDR. I am intentionally skipping more recent and current political leaders because thinking about our current leadership frustrations is not the point of this passage, AND – doing so – will take you off on rabbit trails that won't be good for your soul . . . or blood pressure. A few other leaders come to mind: Nelson Mandela. Mother Theresa. Some current leaders who are making a huge impact would also include Gary Haugen (International Justice Mission), 22 year-old Nobel Peace Prize Recipient Malala Yousafzai, and Bryan Stevenson (founder of the Equal Justice Initiative and "Just Mercy").

Some of these women and men are admitted followers of Jesus, who have read what scripture says; maybe even what Simon Says. They have led in obedience to the Lordship of Christ. Some of them are not professing Christians but have made lasting contributions that have outlived and will outlive them. None of them were or are perfect, but many of them brought about/are bringing about a greater good amidst the complexity of historical, cultural, and economic realities.

But Simon isn't speaking about leadership in the larger Greco-Roman world. He wasn't trying to publish a book about *leading in general*. He's writing a letter to The Church, which he ends by focusing on leadership in The Church. And though some of what Simon Says will apply directly to good leadership in our larger, national and global context, it's important that we apply these words to ourselves – without rushing to apply them to the various leaders we are currently fixated on and frustrated with. At the end of chapter 4 Simon says, "For the time has come for judgment to begin with the household of God." (1 Peter 4:17) So we should, like Simon, start with The Church, it's leadership, and the paramount importance of humility. This is much of what he covers in chapter 5.

### **[READ [1 Peter 5:1-14](#)]**

I'm going to spend a little chunk of this sermon sharing how what Simon Says is convicting and corrective for me; a leader . . . in The Church. I'm doing this for a couple reasons: 1) If we are going to talk about leading humbly, I shouldn't spend my time telling you about victories; instead, you should hear about how I've gotten it wrong – and how God showed up in the humbling failure, often through other leaders who loved me enough to shoot straight with me. 2)

I know that as I share what this looks like in my own life you will find ways to connect these passages to your own lives and leadership struggles. 3) Another reason for me to sort of pick on myself is that we don't actually need to poke fun or pick on anyone else's leadership – especially outside The Church. [It won't be productive . . . maybe cathartic, but not helpful.]

Simon Says: 'as a fellow elder who knows the sufferings of Christ' "I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it." (1 Peter 5:1-2) The Greek word Peter uses for leader/elder is "Presbyteros." Though we Presbyterians love this word – and started a whole church movement based on it – I think the word can be used more broadly, not only for pastors, elders and deacons, but also key leaders, staff members, and others who help lead in the larger Church – on the mission field and with para-church ministries; in denominational offices and Christian colleges, universities and seminaries.

Church leaders are warned not to lord it over others; not to be greedy for financial gain; to serve willingly; and set a godly example for others. Peter also addresses younger leaders – urging them to learn from and respect those who have been running the race awhile longer.

But the number one focus for Peter when it comes to leadership essentials in The Church is humility. "All of you [leaders] must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another." (1 Peter 5:5) Put on humility every day just like you put on your clothes. Don't leave home without it when you step into The Church to lead. Peter talked about the need to be "humble in mind" in chapter 3 (1 Peter 3:8). Humility is part of the holy life Peter called them to early in the letter; a manifestation of the "love that covers a multitude of sins." (1 Peter 4:8) And humility is obviously a mark of all those who follow Jesus, who "humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on the cross." (Philippians 2:8)

But when Peter starts to wrap up his letter to a church that is suffering and will continue to suffer because of allegiance to Christ, he urges leaders in a very direct way: be humble, through and through. Why humility? Why not 'clothe yourselves with vision and strategic planning'? Why not 'clothe yourself with creativity'? Why not 'clothe yourself with strength and determination'? He answers our question, not with a term paper including 7 steps to a more humble life but with a truth about God from scripture. Peter brings us back – once again – to the Old Testament. [He's done this in every passage we've looked at in this series.] Here Peter quotes almost directly from the Greek version/translation of the Hebrew scriptures. Proverbs 3:34 says: for "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." (1 Peter 5:5 from Proverbs 3:34)

Scripture says over and over again that God is on the side of the humble; that He stands with the broken and brokenhearted; that He's not looking for winners but for those who know they are lost without Him. Peter says to those leading: because this is what's true about God you must "Humble yourselves **THEREFORE** [there's that very practical word of his telling us what we can DO] under the mighty hand of God." (1 Peter 5:6)

I won't bore you with all the details of my life growing up, but I'll summarize by saying that – at least on the surface – I had a pretty strong sense of self which was fueled by my family and those around me in the classroom, on the field, and in my church. Looking back, they weren't really objective and honest; but they were positive and encouraging and affirming (which is what all young people need). I'm grateful for the confidence instilled in me, but it does make it a little jarring when you finally start bumping up to failure and limitations that are undeniable.

Marriage and parenting are, for sure, the place where I have been most humbled. Not the early years, but the last several for sure. God's gift to me was putting me in a family in which everyone is smarter, more logical, and more disciplined; a family in which I never get to the end of the day thinking "I nailed it!" It's humbling. And it's just what I need.

But Leadership in The Church has been a different experience. Humility has come more slowly, and less regularly. As an Associate Pastor for 14 years (12 under the leadership of a Senior Pastor who many of you have heard me talk about fondly over the years), there were a LOT of successes in my focus on youth ministry. Growth is great, but it doesn't typically lead to humility. I think I was a faithful Associate Pastor. I loved and respected my boss, John Williams. But I know I didn't follow the words of Peter as diligently as I could have. "You who are younger, must accept the authority of the elders." (1 Peter 5:5) If I could go back, I would do some things differently.

Then I came here 15 years ago, humbled by the privilege and challenge of leading. There was a brand new song on the radio back then, by a group called The Fray. I'm sure it could have had different lyrics and caught my attention just by the tune alone. But the lyrics really grabbed me: "Everyone, knows I'm in over my head, over my head." That was my theme song as I drove into the church parking lot. But I sure didn't say that out loud. That's weak leadership. That's not going to help us move forward. Nobody wants a new Senior Pastor to stand up in the pulpit and say, "Hey everybody, I'm in over my head. But thanks for voting me in and supporting my family financially." So I led in the way I knew, borrowing steps to take I'd learned from others; putting groups together to help us think long-term; taking our then new mission statement and working on Vision and Values statements; helping connect us to church consultants and architects; learning a ton from people who spoke at the Global Leadership Summit each year. We kept growing, faced denominational challenges, grew in our ministries – within and into our community, had a capital campaign, built a building. But everyone didn't know I was still in over my head. I had even sort of forgotten I was in over my head. And that's not a good thing. I was getting a bit "proud." And, remember, God opposes the "proud."

The rest of the story includes realizing some things that were broken in me personally; things that go way back in my family history about emotion and communication; a staffing struggle that I fumbled the ball on; and a bit of exhaustion while I crawled toward my sabbatical in 2015.

Ignoring the words of Peter for leaders in the Church, I lorded it over others and served under compulsion, etc. See 1 Peter 5:2-3]

Let's just say it became easier (not easy but easier) to "Humble myself THEREFORE . . ." (1 Peter 5:6). Here's the real good news. Before and after my sabbatical, loving leaders (Church Leaders) were willing to confront me. And, as Simon Says in 1 Peter 4:8, their "Love [covered] a multitude of [my] sins." An elder invited me into his office to talk; more than a few leaders asked if they could talk with me privately about feeling sidelined and/or ignored; three loving, younger couples actually invited me over for dessert and asked me if I had done all I could to bring reconciliation to a past staffing decision. Just like in my family, I was no longer getting to the end of my day and thinking, "I nailed it!" It was humbling. And it was just what I needed. As Simon Says, "Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, SO THAT He may exalt you [lift you up] in due time." (1 Peter 5:6)

I can say, without any hesitation, that God has been true to His Word and lifted me up in countless ways in the last 5 years. And then came last Sunday. Apparently, God's not done humbling me.

I felt real good about last week's service. We had planned to focus on the kind of suffering Peter was writing about: persecution for faith in Jesus Christ. I acknowledged there are other forms of suffering that shouldn't be shrugged off or ignored – suffering that God uses to shape us and suffering that we can face with courage and, in the process, become salt and light to those around us. But we stayed focused on the Persecuted Church. Jason's pastoral prayer was solely focused on Christians around the world. Our opening hymn and closing song helped us ask the right questions about our willingness to suffer for the Gospel and let the "pressing and crushing" of life make 'New Wine' in us. We nailed it!

And then I got an email. It was from someone who loves Christ and His Church – and this church. This person loves me and I love this person. But the email stated, humbly and in love, that they were waiting in the service to hear a word or a prayer acknowledging the injustice of racism and what still happens on the streets of America. And it didn't come. Dang! We didn't nail it. "Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, so that He may exalt you in due time." (1 Peter 5:6)

What I'm learning is that it's not like you just learn from mistakes, never to make any again. The Gospel is simple, but The Church is complex. And there will be many more opportunities to "Humble myself, therefore, under the mighty hand of God."

Can I say, these are humbling times! And I might add, I'm in over my head.

As if a global pandemic wasn't enough, let's add race relations in America, growing polarization in politics that affects how we relate to one another, a growing pressure to have in-person worship, the blessing and bane of technology, a sanctuary renovation at the same time. Aaaagh!

It's enough to make someone pretty anxious, don't you think? And not just pastors, but church leaders who sit in Zoom meetings and talk about government loan/grant programs, worship and building use, capital campaigns in the midst of difficult economic realities, and more. It's enough to make everyone anxious.

Thankfully, Peter goes on. Simon Says: "Cast all your anxiety on God because He cares for you." (1 Peter 5:7) Do we do that? Do we know HOW to do that?

Let's admit we have ANXIETY for starters; see if we can name where it is coming from; and then give it to God, who – BY THE WAY – is NOT anxious about any of this. Our Sovereign God is at work, behind the scenes, making all things new and inviting us – as "royal priests and His very own people" (1 Peter 2:9) – to be a part of His new Kingdom.

And all the while we must, as Simon Says, "stay alert (or be vigilant). Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour." (1 Peter 5:8) One of the greatest strategies of the enemy is to break down and paralyze The Church Jesus set in motion and the Holy Spirit breathed life into at Pentecost, by devouring Church Leaders – Presbyteros.

So let's stay close together and, "like living stones, let [ourselves] be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. [Let us] Come to Him, a Living Stone . . . our Chief Cornerstone." (from parts of 1 Peter 2:4-6) Let us humble ourselves – knowing that we are easy to take out and get off track in our arrogance and confidence.

Ultimate humility comes from being very clear about who is in charge of The Church, and who is not. Humility is also what was clearly demonstrated to us in Jesus Christ; on the Cross. And as we are "Rooted in Jesus and Growing in His Love," we will find ourselves more humbly "Branching Out to Serve Others" in His name and for His glory.

And so we come to the Table of the Lord. We come to be more deeply "Rooted in Jesus." We come to be filled with the symbolic reminders of His love so that we can grow in it. We come, ready to be filled up so that we can "Branch Out" with love and humility in a world filled with pride and hostility, hurt and anger, sadness and lostness. We come to The Cross; a very humble place for God to dwell. A place He was willing to hang out (literally). May our Chief Shepherd lead us to this difficult and humble place.