

Green Hill Presbyterian Church
“Servant Leadership”
Thomas G. Speers, III
Ordinary 31—November 5, 2017

Joshua 3: 7-17; Matthew 23:1-12

This past week I heard from a friend who called me because he had been asked to serve on the Session of his church and he wondered if we could talk about that. Before accepting the nomination to serve, he wanted to ask me about the responsibilities and expectations for elders in the Presbyterian Church. He said something that I’ve heard before. He told me that he did not feel worthy to serve as an elder; that there were many people more qualified than he was. That made me smile, not just because I’ve heard and felt this way before, but even more, as I explained to him, because this attitude puts him in good company.

Nearly every one of the prophets called by God had the same feeling. Moses tried to say that he wasn’t a good public speaker. Jeremiah explained that he was too young. Isaiah was not pure or clean enough. Their excuses had some truth to them. Moses actually wasn’t a good public speaker. Jeremiah was young. Isaiah knew all too well how he was unclean, but those reservations and doubts are nothing when compared to the presence of God to give us all that we need. So, I encouraged my friend to accept the nomination to serve, as I would encourage any of you if you are asked. It isn’t so much about you and your abilities great or little as they may be, but rather about letting God use you in God’s service.

I thought of my friend when I read our lessons for today. Has anyone ever had a harder act to follow than Joshua? He had to follow Moses as the leader for the people of Israel. “Moses was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that the Lord sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel.” Joshua had to follow that. I suspect that like my friend he felt underqualified.

Joshua understood that he wasn’t Moses. He was Joshua. So, he didn’t try to be someone else; he was himself. Yet more than that, he also understood that greatness comes from God. It was God who made Moses great. It was God who led Moses. It was God who gave Moses the power to lead and God promised to give the same power to Joshua saying, “This day I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, so that they may know that I will be with you as I was with Moses.” And in the same way that Moses led the people across the sea, Joshua led them across the Jordan. It is much the same story: in each the waters were held back, and the point is that God is the source of greatness; God is the source of this liberation movement; God cared for us in Moses; God will continue to care for us in Joshua. This is an important word for us on All Saints’ Sunday. There are people who have died who were once pillars of this church and when they died, some people wondered how we would carry on without them, but you did. You discovered what Joshua discovered. God will give you what you need.

Look also at the words of Jesus: He tells his followers that they should do what their religious leaders tell them, (I’ve always liked that line) but they shouldn’t be like them (I’d prefer to overlook that line). Jesus says, Recognize that you all are students, you are all learning together. And then he says: *The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.* I wonder how we might celebrate that kind of honest humility or servant leadership, the kind that is always open to learning from others; the kind that celebrates the worth of every human being; the kind that knows that all our strengths are really gifts from God and not just our own; the kind that recognizes with the old gospel hymn that it’s *not my brother, nor my sister; not the*

preacher nor the deacon; not my father, nor my mother, not the stranger, nor my neighbor, but it's me O Lord, standing in the need of prayer.

Last April, Rebecca Sabky, who is a former admission director at Dartmouth, wrote about a student who seemed to have this outlook. He attended a large public school in New England. “He was clearly bright, as evidenced by his class rank and teachers’ praise. He had a supportive recommendation from his college counselor and an impressive list of extracurriculars. Even with these qualifications, he might not have stood out. But one letter of recommendation caught my eye. It was from a school custodian.”¹

She continued talking about how the admissions office at Dartmouth receives all kinds of recommendations from all kinds of important people whom an applicant thinks will impress the school but generally fail to provide another angle on who the student is or could be as a member of the college community. This letter was different.

“The custodian wrote that he was compelled to support this student’s candidacy because of his thoughtfulness. This young man was the only person in the school who knew the names of every member of the janitorial staff. He turned off lights in empty rooms, consistently thanked the hallway monitor each morning and tidied up after his peers even if nobody was watching. This student, the custodian wrote, had a refreshing respect for every person at the school, regardless of position, popularity or clout.”² The greatest among you will be your servant.

On this All Saints’ Sunday, we celebrate and give thanks for all those who have gone before us, who continue in God’s good care and keeping, those who surround us and cheer us on as we continue the race set before us. They are a motley crew. They had faults and extraordinary strengths just like all the rest of us. As we just sang, they were doctors and queens, and even a shepherdess on the green; they were soldiers and priests, and one was slain by a fierce wild beast. Yet they lived not only in ages past, there are hundreds of thousands still.³ Just look around you and you can find them. They tend to notice the people no one else sees. They tend to have an honest humility. They tend to have discovered in their own lives that greatness is ultimately from God, who gives us all we need.

On All Saints Day, we remember members of this church who have died in the past year and now live in God’s presence: Michael Greer, Betty Williams, Elsie Donnigan. They likely would be the first to tell you that they were nothing special. The truth is God made them special and the world is a better place because of them. We also remember a great many more: people who touched our lives and made them better, more faithful, more loving, more courageous. Today we affirm that every life bears something of God’s image. Sometimes it is easier to see that image but it is present in every life. When we live that reality, we will discover a level of humility that can change the world. God can use my friend to serve as an elder and will give him all he needs. God can use you in special service and give you all you need even though it may not be what you expect.

I’ve used illustrations from music today and want to use one more—and then Bruce is going to lead us in singing this hymn: There is a Balm in Gilead—it’s number 48 in the Red Hymnal: *If you cannot preach like Peter, if you can’t pray like Paul, just tell the love of Jesus, and say he died for all.*

For the sake of all the saints, celebrate the gifts God has given to you to keep right on down the road that leads to the Promised Land.

Let’s sing.

¹ Rebecca Sabky, Check This Box if You’re a Good Person, © 2017 The New York Times, April 4, 2017.

² Ibid.

³ Lesbia Scott, I Sing a Song of the Saints of God © 1929, in The Presbyterian Hymnal, © 1990 Wsetminster/John Knox Press.