

Sermon Text for August 5, 2018

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Joshua 1:1-11, 16-18, Acts 1:15-26

“Chain of Command”

Is this the only place that you can go to where people aren't talking about Trump and the decisions that are being made in our country? I refuse to speak about it directly and not because I don't have opinions. I do, and I have strong ones. How can I not as someone who has spent much of his life working in communities where the churches where I have served have advocated for the powerless. It has been a part of my life that is important, so yeah, I have strong feelings. I also believe that the Bible is a political document. It is the Word of God and when God's Word speaks it affects everything, especially politics.

Remember Jesus meeting with Pilate, Pilate is so confused by fake news that he asks the simple question, what is truth? Jesus in front of Pilate, and he wasn't political? But Jesus is always on the side of those who are without power, as he chose to be. You see the church has seldom had political power and kept its soul. So no, I want this to remain a place where you can come and hear about what we need to do in order to bring the kingdom of God here on this earth, and it is always to be on the side of the poor and the oppressed. I just assume every Sunday that you can make up your own mind as to who is and who is not on the side of the poor and the oppressed, on our side in that battle. You don't need me to tell you.

Our Scriptures today, both of them, speak in a way about major transitions that take place in the life of a nation and in the life of a faith community. A new leader stands out, the old is finished and gone and the next generation takes on the mantle. I believe that we have a choice on whom we choose to be our leaders. I believe we can be right and we can be wrong on whom we choose as our leaders. But that is not the way it was in the Old Testament, God chose the leader, there wasn't an election, it was controlled by God.

We read about the two most transitional times in the life of the church, but there is one single message as the chain of command changes, it stays the same because God is in control, yes even today, God is in control. Let's remember that as a church and as individuals.

READ SCRIPTURE

A number of years ago I had a chance to go with my Father-in-law to go see the Seattle Seahawks play against the Atlanta Falcons, in Seattle where they live. It was my first Seahawks game. Something happened at the beginning of the game that I had never seen at a sporting event before. A group of the players wives were introduced and they lifted up a 12th man flag. Now for those of you who don't know, there are 11 men on a football team, so who is this 12th man? The fans. The fans can make a huge difference in a game, especially between winning and losing. Now I know that some of them get out of hand, but it is really like having another player on your team when you play at home.

Today in Acts we find the disciples still in the upper room where we left them last week. Who remembers what they were doing in that room? They were doing exactly what Jesus told them to do. Not making plans and getting to work, but waiting and praying constantly. What a great example that is for us today. In fact we started, well I started this Wednesday in the sanctuary. It has to start there. It has to.

But in our second Scripture today there was one more thing that they did. They decided to replace the 12th man. Judas who is mentioned quite a few times, had committed suicide after betraying Jesus. What a sober reminder he is to us that one of the twelve, Peter says one of us, betrayed Jesus. We have to replace him and he gives the criteria that is needed in order to find the right person to replace him. It was some very strict criteria. Then they voted after they had prayed.

I want you to notice a few things about how this comes to be and especially some features of this chain of command that is set up. Peter steps out in the void that was created to basically become the leader. Jesus had left, who was going to step out and fill these shoes that were impossible to fill? Peter had been called the rock by Jesus and certainly seemed groomed for that position.

We find the same thing with Joshua who had to fill the shoes comparable to those that Peter had to fill as he follows Moses' leadership. But Joshua has God tell him, just like I was with Moses so I will be with you, be strong and courageous. The people reply, I love this part, just as we followed Moses, so we will follow you Joshua.

Well, if you know anything about the Old Testament I hope you know that the people of Israel were not very good at following. I don't know if that last statement is more of a threat or a promise. They didn't obey neither Moses nor God which is why they struggled for 40 years in the wilderness. But underlying this grooming of both Peter

and Joshua was the realization that the full responsibility was not on their shoulders but on God's. The success of the early church was not because of Peter's governance but as Acts tells us over and over again, but because of God's presence through the Holy Spirit in the church.

There is no greater proof of this than if you step back and think of the chain of command that Jesus had set up around him. Judas led people to kill him. Peter, who is now the de facto earthly leader of the church, is the very one who betrayed and denied Jesus 3 times and then runs away unable to be a witness to his death.

Go back to the prerequisites for the 12th man. He had to be a witness from the very beginning, from when Jesus was baptized, basically when things were going pretty well. Not a witness to the very end when things were scary and tenuous and very dangerous. Because if he had said that then only the women and John would have qualified. Here we find that it is the church that first betrayed Christ. But Peter in all of his sin, is still able to step out knowing that God uses, has to use he has no choice, imperfect vessels to establish his perfect kingdom.

There are those who interpret this passage as an example of Peter and the other disciples getting ahead of themselves. Think about it, it kind of makes sense. They jumped the gun because what did Jesus tell them to do when they got back to Jerusalem, wait and pray, not organize and fill in the organizational model in order to be at full capacity. If they had waited maybe the 12th man would have been someone different, probably not Matthias who is never heard from again after this Scripture. Probably it would have been Paul who becomes so important in God's plan for redemption and teaching.

Again who knows, but there could be some validity in this because in times of transition, especially in a church, there are those who are very concerned with structure, control, orthodoxy, let's make sure we have everybody in place doing what they are supposed to be doing and then move forward, often at the cost of mission. Were these disciples more concerned with structure than they were with mission? Look at Peter's criteria for the next one chosen. Jesus had chosen the other 11, why couldn't they just wait and keep praying and let the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost chose the 12th man?

Maybe the disciples were more concerned with structure while the Holy Spirit was concerned with mission. Look at who the Holy Spirit uses to carry out its mission on earth, people that we find in Scripture, people completely outside of the Jewish structure.

A eunuch, a tanner, a gentile, a woman. Again and again, Acts is the story of how the Holy Spirit breaks out of old structures, old traditions, old expectations, old roles in order to reach the whole world with the news of Christ.

The same is true today. Hundreds of thousands of churches across this country are more concerned about the chain of command and structure than they are about mission. They are more concerned about polity and rules, specific worship and music styles and clothing styles, ancient models of leadership. Women in leadership, unacceptable, praise songs in church, unthinkable, youth playing a vital, weekly role in worship, not in my church. These aren't churches a century ago this is today, churches that are fossilizing so as to preserve a perfect relic of a dead religious artifact.

First Presbyterian Church is always in a time of transition and it really doesn't matter who is behind this pulpit, because this is not the apex of the chain of command. Jesus Christ is the head of the church and we must not allow the Holy Spirit and its mission to be quenched even if it is at the cost of perfect, ordered structure. God is in control and we must not force the church in a direction that we want it to take.

The only way to ensure that the Holy Spirit has its way is that we allow ourselves to wait and pray, even to the point of postponing a discussion until we are sure that we have waited and prayed enough to know God's will regardless of the system we have in place.

Businesswomen and men, political leaders, how many times did you make an important decision this week without so much as an upwards glance to the Lord? Families, how many of you made significant financial decisions this week without ever pausing to wonder whether God was giving you permission to do so? Students, how many times did you make choices about your behavior this week without considering what the Bible says about it? Husbands and wives which of you took one step closer toward adultery or divorce last week because you refused to pause and seek the counsel of trusted godly friends?

As we transition in our lives, we must stop and wait and seek counsel from the Holy Spirit and those people whom God puts in our lives to help guide us and give us that counsel. Likewise, as a church we must recognize that it is not up to the chain of command, Moses or Joshua, the earthly Jesus or Peter, but it is up to God.

I believe that leaders ought to be persons of integrity and faithfulness. I believe that we should be held to higher standards. But if my continued life and ministry in this

church is entirely dependent upon my faithfulness, then I'm on borrowed time. I am a sinner and I make stupid decisions and I will not always be as faithful to God and to you as I ought to be.

But, here is the good news. My life and my ministry is not based upon my faithfulness to God. It is based upon God's faithfulness to me. God's grace. It is true for me and every single one of us. God can take a Matthias or a Paul, a Mary Magdalene or a Deborah, and yes even a Bob and fill that person with his Holy Spirit and use that person to do something new and miraculous. And he can do it through you too.

God needs people who have been on a journey with his son Jesus Christ and are willing to witness to his impact on their life to take up the reigns and follow him without looking over their shoulder. Let us do that together. Amen.