

Sermon Text for November 7, 2021

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Ruth 3:1-5, Mark 12:38-40

“When leadership fails”

From a very young age I was exposed to leaders who were known across the globe. Before we moved permanently to the United States I was a missionary kid in Portugal and in Italy and my dad moved in circles that I didn't realize until later, was not normal. When we moved to Ventnor it was not unusual for Bishop Desmond Tutu to come to our house when he was in the United States. I'll never forget when my dad introduced me to Coretta Scott King, MLK's wife in Vancouver Canada, they knew each other pretty well.

Then while I was in seminary I had a chance to work in Prague for a summer to help organize a conference that for the first time since the wall came down gathered Catholics and Protestants from both East and West. I had a chance to meet and eat with a number of Cardinals, the Archbishop of Canterbury, over my life I have met and spent time with three different Russian Patriarch's and one pope in Ratzinger and one head of state in Vaclav Havel. When I worked in Russia I had the chance to meet a number of heads of state from the President of Ireland to Gorbachev. While there I worked with the current head of the CIA, Robert Burns who was the Ambassador to Russia at the time, I met with Newt Gingrich and Arnold Schwarzenegger when he was the governor.

In Prague I'll never forget that summer and that evening when we had an event in the public square and we had roped off seats for the VIPs, so the archbishop of Canterbury and Patriarch Alexi and the Russian cardinal and some of the elderly women had squeezed themselves behind the ropes and were literally standing right next to these VIP's, well, Patriarch Alexi stood up and offered his seat to one of the elderly women, and then the Cardinal and then like a chain reaction the entire section was filled with elderly widows in seats and VIP's on their feet. It was actually pretty comical.

Today we find ourselves in the Bible away from our Bible stories and in the lectionary text for today. In the Scripture for today we find very clear directives to the leaders of the church, to the Jewish leaders of Jesus' day, and to the leaders of civic society and government. Can we apply what Jesus has to say to us as leaders in the church to also leaders within civic and our current political society, or is it just reserved for what happens within these four walls. I would say that the most effective leadership actually follows what Jesus says when he addresses leadership.

Both of our Scriptures point to people in leadership having as their primary responsibility the ensuring that all people, especially the most vulnerable, be protected. That is the primary responsibility of the leaders of the church after they lead people to Jesus, is that the most vulnerable in the community be protected. Let's read.

READ

We really could have seen the story of Naomi, or the story of Ruth, as one of our stories in the Bible. After all Ruth is in Jesus' genealogy and so you know she is an important person in Scripture. Remember where we find ourselves in this story if you don't know it. Ruth and

Naomi have returned to Israel after a famine but both of their husbands have died and they are basically left with nothing as they find themselves back home looking to start over. The mom, Ruth, in verse 1 tells Naomi what their primary purpose is not, and that is, look at vs.1, to ensure that Naomi has some security. I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you. Both of them are widows with Naomi really also considered an orphan as she finds herself all alone.

So Ruth goes to work and recommends to Naomi that she finds her security by seducing Naomi's brother in law which would guarantee her a place in a home and a place in society for her and for whatever family she might have in the future. The plan is successful and Ruth finds the security that Naomi was searching for and Ruth's becomes King David's grandmother and in the direct line to Jesus. So that's pretty cool to see that all of this began with the searching for security for a widow and an orphan.

When we move to the New Testament reading we see the scribes being described as one of the main actors in the story. Jesus is speaking pretty much teaching against them. He began to teach his disciples and he tells them beware of the scribes and then gives a list of reasons as to why his disciples ought to beware of them. Who were the scribes and why were they so dangerous in Jesus' eyes?

The scribes began simply as their title denotes. They were the ones who wrote down the Scriptures and the laws so that they could be handed down from generation to generation. As time progressed they became the experts in the law and also provided some interpretation to the laws, so much so that during Jesus' time they were considered the experts on the law and the ones who were able to dictate how the laws were to be enforced and how society and culture ought to follow the laws as prescribed. As a result they were pretty much the authority on the laws that were in place.

In fact in Matthew 23 Jesus tells his disciples and the crowds that the scribes were in a position of authority, they were rightly leaders of the people and so they should do what they taught, but his warning came as he said, but do not do what they do. Do as they teach, but don't do as they do. You see, the authority that built up over time in their position made them corrupt. What Jesus attacks in these verses is not the religious practices, but he does speak out against a hypocritical religiosity. Mark describes the scribe as someone who wishes to be endowed with special privilege and status.

But what is the basic responsibility of someone who is in power in the church? What is true religion? James in chapter 1:27 states: religion that is pure and undefiled before God is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress. Matthew accuses the scribes of having broken the basic tenant to religious responsibility and duty. All you have to do is care for the widow and instead you have devoured their houses for yourself. You are under the greater condemnation.

Over history the learned have always carried influence and power over the years, they have always carried authority. The way in which the Presbyterian Church is structured is such that your pastor has to have a college degree and then a three year graduate degree and then pass ordination exams. It isn't enough to be called by God, you have to be tested intellectually to be able to be a pastor.

Now, that isn't the case in all churches today. So who would be the loudest voices in religion today? Who would be the most powerful religious voices in religion today? Where do they get their source of power? The court evangelicals would get their power from those who are in power politically. Last Sunday, Reformation Sunday would have potentially been a better Sunday to preach on the failed leadership of the church which was so evident in Germany in Martin Luther's Day, as it is so evident in Jesus' day. It isn't the church that has failed, it isn't Scripture that has lost its authority, it is the leadership that has focused more on its own desires and its own wishes and lost sight of the fact that it is the least of these, the most vulnerable of society that we are called to shepherd in a way that provides, as Ruth states, security.

These past few Sundays these recent themes of denying self and requiring that we decrease as Jesus increases has shifted the focus away from what we want and what Jesus requires of us. We are called to move away from a religious posturing and toward a costly discipleship. That costly discipleship requires that we look very closely at what we believe which has to be matched with what we do. If we think Jesus would approve anything that might champion the strong over the weak, then we are worshipping the wrong Jesus. Amen.