

**First Presbyterian Church
Southampton, New York
“Follow the Leader”**

**Isaiah 43:1 – 7
Luke 3:15 – 17, 21 – 22**

The Baptism of the Lord

January 10, 2016

Many years ago, during one of my earlier pastorates, I was teaching an officer training class for a group of church members who'd been elected as elders and deacons. The subject of this particular class was the leadership role of the Session; and so we talked about what the Session is, and what the Session does, and how the Session guides the daily life of the congregation. Since the Session is made up of elders, part of the lesson was devoted to a discussion of how elders exercise leadership in the church. And so we considered the various responsibilities which are borne by elders; and the personal and spiritual gifts which are helpful for elders; and the challenges which come with the territory of being elders.

It was a good class, with lots of helpful discussion; and a meaningful experience was had by all. But after the class, as we were all packing up and heading for the door, one of the elders-elect pulled me aside... and told me that she didn't think that she could be an elder after all. I was very surprised to hear her say this, as I'd considered her to have wonderful leadership potential... and I was hoping that she would be a valuable asset to our Session. I couldn't imagine why she'd think that she wouldn't be up to the task of being an elder.

But, as we discussed the matter, she made it clear that she didn't think she could be an elder, because, in her opinion, she wasn't a good enough person. “*I can't live up to the expectations,*” she told me, “*I'm just not spiritual enough to do it.*” And then she went on to cite her lack of biblical knowledge, her upbringing in a different, non-Presbyterian, denomination, and a general sense of personal unworthiness as further reasons for her decision to change her mind about becoming an elder.

I tried to explain that the church wasn't looking for perfect people, or expert biblical scholars... just people who are willing to do their best, and to be guided by the will and wisdom of God. But my efforts were in vain... as she was adamant that church eldership was simply beyond her reach. And, in all the years that I served at that church, she never again answered the call to be an elder, or a deacon either for that matter; although she and her husband were very active members, and regular worship attenders.

Now, my experience with that “I'm not good enough to be an elder” church member is worth remembering this morning... as we once again ordain and install another class of elders, deacons, and trustees to be leaders in our own church family. And that's because, in one very important way, the woman had it exactly right: she really *wasn't* “good enough” to be an elder! She really *didn't* know the Bible very well; she really *hadn't* grown up in a Presbyterian congregation; and she really *wasn't* able to solve all of the personal problems and issues that vexed her and her family.

In pronouncing herself to be a very flawed and imperfect human being, her self-analysis really was spot on. But what she failed to realize, and what I was unable to help her understand, was that *all* the other elders and deacons-elect, and her pastor, too, for that matter... were right there in that “not good enough” boat with her! To some extent or other, every one of us in that officer training class was struggling under the weight of being fallen and imperfect people. We didn’t all have the same problems that she had; some of us knew the Bible better than others; some of us had spent a lifetime in Presbyterian churches; some of us were doing great in certain areas of our lives, while at the same time completely blowing it in other areas.

But the bottom line was that we were all keenly aware of the fact that we were, in ways great and small, something *less* than ideal, superlative, textbook examples of flawless Christian discipleship. And, of course, the same can be said for every elder, every deacon, and every trustee that stood before this congregation this morning. We are, all of us, sinners; we are, all of us, tainted with grudges, bad habits, and a certain amount of narcissism; we are, all of us, prone to fight, and argue, and pout when we don’t get our own way.

And if the health, and the future, and the vitality of the church... this church, my former church, *any* church... depended solely on the ability of its pastors, elders, deacons, and trustees to be, by their own strength and willpower, “good enough” Christian disciples to get the job done; *we are lost!* Do you understand that? *Lost!*

If that woman who bailed out of my officer training class was right; if the health and wellbeing of the church really did depend upon its leaders being good enough, and holy enough, and righteous enough to make it all happen... than we might as well just give it up now! We might as well just go home and get the chili started for the football games this afternoon; because, as a church, we got no shot.

And not because the elders and deacons and trustees that stood before us this morning are any more sinful or evil than anybody else. Not at all! They’re great people. The Nominating Committee did a wonderful job of gathering a talented team of leaders... and I’m really looking forward to working with them for the next three years. But I don’t care how wonderful they are; on their own... by their own strength... on the basis of their own discipleship credentials... they cannot, and they will not, lead this church successfully for the next three *days*, never mind the next three years. They just won’t be able to do it.

Now, this might sound like a rather grim and depressing assessment of the reality of our situation; but it really isn’t, because it’s only one part of a much larger picture of successful church leadership. And we know that that’s true because, somebody help me here... what anniversary did we celebrate at First Presbyterian last year? How many years has this church been in business? 375? And now heading toward 376? We can’t lead the church successfully by our own strength and ability... yet the church is still alive and functioning after nearly four centuries. So, what’s that mean? Hello! It means something else is going on here... above and beyond our own strength, and goodness, and ability!

And to understand what that “something else” is, we need to refer once again to our Scripture lessons for this morning. Both of our texts remind us of the great spiritual truth that is the real game-changer when it comes to our ability to be effective leaders in the church. And that is the fact that, as we go about the business of building, and leading, and being the church... our Heavenly Father is *with us*, every step of the way!

And He is not just with us like a sidekick, or a passenger, or an uninvolved innocent bystander... He's with us to provide that which is lacking in our hearts, and our souls, and our faith so we *can* accomplish that which He's called us to do! In other words, on our own we may not be good enough; but God is with us to make up the difference... and with God by our side, we are more than able to be leaders who don't just keep the church doors open, but who help the church to change hearts and lives in the name of Christ.

Hear again the words of Isaiah, that we read together from chapter 43:

"But now, this is what the Lord says – 'Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze.

"Do not be afraid, for I am with you; I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west. I will say to the north, Give them up! And to the south, Do not hold them back. Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth – everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."

Now, that's a powerful proclamation of God's determination to be with His people at all times, and in all places... including our time, and our place. And similar proclamations can be found from one end of the Bible to the other. Our Lord constantly reminds His people that, what they do... He does. And where they go... He goes. And when various people in the Scriptures start sounding like the lady from my officer training class, saying that they aren't good enough to do the job that God has called them to do... people like Moses, and Jeremiah, and Paul the Apostle; God reminds them in no uncertain terms that He will be with them, and that makes them more than able to get the job done.

And, as we learned in our lesson from Luke's gospel, even Jesus Himself was promised the ongoing presence of His Father... as He went about the work of His earthly ministry. One of the points of Jesus' baptism, demonstrated by the Holy Spirit descending from heaven and lighting on Him in the form of a dove... was to make it clear that God would be with His Son amid all the trials and challenges of His work.

When Jesus emerged from the waters of the Jordan, and heard the voice of God saying to Him, *"You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased,"* He knew that God would never fail to give Him the strength, the courage, the wisdom, and the love to accomplish the world-changing mission before Him. And that same promise is for you and me, too... and that self-doubting lady from my officer training class. Not that we're destined to be saviors and messiahs like Jesus was; but just that, also like Jesus, God will give us whatever we need... to make up for whatever we lack... in order to accomplish whatever it is... that God has called us to do!

Which doesn't mean that it's okay for us to be lazy, or complacent, or sloppy in our efforts to be good leaders. As officers and trustees, we *are* called to a higher standard. We do make vows and promises at the time of our ordination and installation that we will take seriously the business of growing in our discipleship. And the New Testament is quite clear that, if you aspire to a position of leadership in the church, you'd better take seriously your responsibility to be a person of virtue, and honor, and Christian grace. And, really, that responsibility holds true not just for church officers and other leaders... but for all of us who call ourselves disciples.

We should always be trying to grow, and improve, and become better and more faithful leaders today than we were yesterday. And as we do so, we can take comfort, and courage, from the fact that, through it all, we are never beyond the reach of God's presence, God's grace, God's guidance, and God's love. And it's *that* alone, which makes any kind of church leadership possible!

2016 is going to be a great year, here at First Presbyterian! We've got great leaders... and we all serve a great God! Let's follow our leaders, and follow our Lord, with confidence and with joy! And in all that we do, let's give the Lord our thanks and praise!

That's our calling as disciples! In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen!