### “Compassionate Leadership” Steve Finlan for The First Church, July 21, 2024

**Jeremiah 23:1–6**

1Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the Lord. 2Therefore, thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the Lord. 3Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. 4I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the Lord.

5 The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. 6In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: “The Lord is our righteousness.”

**Mark 6:30–34**

30The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. 31He said to them, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. 32And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. 33Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. 34As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

We all know leadership is extremely important. However, I usually find lectures about leadership to be boring, and filled with platitudes and half-true sayings. The exception, though, is what the Bible says. The Old Testament gives examples of bad leadership, as we see here, shepherds who divide and scatter the flock instead of protecting it. Then Jeremiah talks about the coming ruler who will rule justly and not by appearances, one who will “execute justice and righteousness” (23:5). Similar words are used by Isaiah about the one who will “uphold” the kingdom “with justice and righteousness” (Isa 9:7).

Also interesting is when Jesus talks about leadership, giving simple and powerful principles, as when he said “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all” (Mark 9:35). Now that’s a *real* leader. A real leader does not expect mindless conformity or perfect agreement. A leader fosters spiritual sensitivity, so that people with different ideas can work together, united in purpose. Jesus calls for spiritual tolerance and service motivation; that’s what makes for real unity, not any kind of outward uniformity, but a unity of purpose.

Jesus shows his leadership when he has compassion on the multitude because they were forlorn and leaderless, confused and directionless, like sheep without a shepherd. He would give them hope and focus, in place of confusion and sadness. He would give them the promise of eternal life, which gives them an ultimate sense of direction. There is a confidence and release that comes when you conclude that your Father in heaven loves you. To believe that one will receive spiritual guidance throughout life and that God has a plan of permanent growth and spiritual progress hereafter, is to attain peace. Imagine having confidence in that guidance. It is as the psalm says, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (119:105). This belief forms a foundation of faith.

Life can seem to have a crazy uncertainty. And even those who are fully loyal to God will encounter strange obstacles and problems, but underlying it all will be a steady certainty about God’s ultimate watchcare. No storm can shake my inmost calm, when to that rock I’m clinging. The challenge will be to remain calm with sustained hope in the midst of uncertainty.

The Epistle of James talks about relying on God, when it says “If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. But ask in faith, never doubting” (James 1:5–6).

People who do this are capable of leading their lives in a loyal and mature manner, and those are the people who can be good leaders. The one who can exert self-control has leadership ability. Those are the people whose dedication to purpose exceeds self-interest. Jeremiah hoped such a person would some day lead Judah. Christians hope that they choose such leaders in their churches and seminaries today, knowing that that’s the kind of leader Jesus was. As Paul wrote to the Philippians: “Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others” (Phil 2:4). That interest will have to do with spiritual growth and health, and it will always respect the free will of others. It will not involve manipulation, pressure, or coercive shaping of people, as happens in authoritarian cults.

A good leader honors everyone’s contributions. A good leader can embody all the features of a good friend, with the added responsibility that leadership calls for. In *The Lord of the Rings*, when one of the “halflings,” a hobbit, was sizing up a short sword and one of the men said “You should not encourage him. I do not doubt his heart; only the reach of his arm.” Eowen, a noblewoman of Rohan, replied “Why should Merry be left behind? He has as much cause to go to war as you. Why can he not fight for those he loves?”

Merry and Eowen both played important parts in the defeat of the enemy. Everyone has a part to play. Everyone has a cause. That’s what every good leader knows. A good leader inspires each of us to bring our talents forth, that we may demonstrate strength in our diversity, unity in our purpose.