

“FOR THE COMMON GOOD,” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, July 11, 2021

Not so long ago I was invited to deliver an invocation for a legislative forum hosted by the Southern Wayne Regional Chamber of Commerce. Speaking were state legislators, as well as one of our United States “Congress people.” In keeping with ecumenical and interfaith attendance at the event, I strove to be as inclusive as possible in the words I raised up to God on our mutual behalf. Accordingly, the prayer I prayed was this:
“O Gracious God, in these parlous and perilous times marked by ‘politics as usual,’ help us to be un-usual in our devotion to your large, sanctifying purposes. Keep our passions free of crass rancor and selfish motivations so that what we say and what we do is honest, and true, serving the cause of love and justice for our state, our nation, and our world. Amen.”

Prompting my choice of words in prayer was the disturbing public climate in our nation at large today. Distrust and cynicism are up—way up. Public life is more polarized and corrosive than I can remember it being since the 1960s. It may even be worse than that. Indeed, the spirit of civility, courtesy, and cooperation is way down. Any effort at mutual understanding is in short supply. Facebook and Twitter definitely seem to lend themselves to a greater spontaneity and impulsiveness on participants’ part. More and more people seem to talk before they think. Outrageous and hurtful things are posted that would have once embarrassed us. Folks say and do all kinds of self-serving things without a sense of shame. At almost every turn, we seem to be at a point where more energy is expended tearing things down than building them up, which I can’t count as good.

I know that the Old Testament writer Ecclesiastes, a man of wisdom, said that “for everything there is a season.” (*Ecclesiastes 3:1-8*) Nevertheless, I don’t think that the Good Book meant that there should be a season and an excuse for bad, boorish, and mean behavior. God’s word in the Old and New Testaments alike teaches us another way. As the Apostle Paul would put it, a “still more excellent way.” (*1 Corinthians 12:31*) Specifically, through the word of the prophets and the word of Jesus Christ and his apostles God calls us to respect each other and to be a people of love and justice, even to the point of self-sacrifice. And that applies to the way leaders lead us and we respect those in positions of leadership throughout our society.

Providing leadership in our country today is becoming such a difficult and challenging task that many capable, caring, and altruistic people don’t want to put their lives—or the lives of their families—on the line and in the public spotlight. Consequently, the applicant pool for leadership in many public spheres of our nation is shrinking, contributing to a leadership deficit and shortage.

The number of young men and women embracing Christian ministry as a vocation is way down. Ditto for teachers and school administrators. Meanwhile, once idealistic men and women in service-oriented professions such as medicine, nursing, and social work report more and more dissatisfaction with their work. This has become even more glaring in our year and a half of a Covid pandemic.

Folks taking on such posts once took joy in trying to do good. Today, however, they find their altruistic motives doubted and their gifts and talents slammed. Instead of kindness and appreciation, they all encounter more and more conflict and adversarial attitudes on the part of those they are trying to help. Indeed, conflict and confrontation in public life prevail over the spirit of mutual cooperation and a sense of shared responsibility in getting the tasks at hand done or resolved. As a result, some highly talented people have decided they don't want to put up with all the grief that goes with serving others in a myriad of professional roles. Who knows? In this crazy time, you can get shot for just doing your job! Literally.

Ironically, our nation's negativity and cynicism towards those in public leadership is breeding exactly the kind of leaders we don't want. In fact, the folks who seem to best withstand the glare of hostile public scrutiny and criticism are those who are the most hard-boiled, arrogant, self-serving, and opportunistic. Egomaniacs survive very well in public life today because they don't care what other people think, except to use and manipulate them. Unfortunately for us all, these manipulators are public servants in name only.

The Bible holds out for us all a different standard, not only in the way that leaders lead, but also in the way we respect and uphold good leadership, appropriate leadership. In the Gospel of Matthew, for example, Jesus declares to his own apostles jostling for the best seat in heaven that anyone who wants to be first in the kingdom of God—in other words, a leader—needs to be a servant and slave to others. (*Matthew 20:25-27*) Humility, rather than self-serving arrogance, is the gospel mandate for us all. On the other hand, God's people are expected to respect and honor honest leadership, rather than constantly snipe away at it, undermining accomplishments for the common good.

The Book of Exodus, recalling Moses' leadership of the Israelite people in their forty years of wanderings through the wilderness, puts it best and succinctly too. Offering a kind of addendum to the Ten Commandments, it declares: "You shall not revile God, nor curse a ruler of your people." (*Exodus 22:28*) To be sure, there are some cases where leaders have personally forfeited any right to our honor and respect. If and when they have betrayed public trust and perpetrated grossly dishonest acts that disgrace their office, they should be chastised and removed. Yet there are more cases than not today

when our leaders end up as whipping posts for public frustrations and discontents due to deeper social problems that are beyond their power to immediately control or solve.

Frankly, I don't know how readily our nation can turn its troubled attitudes towards leadership around. Sometimes things do have to get a lot worse before they get a lot better. But I do know that we as Christians are always supposed to be on the side of the angels—not waiting for others to do the right thing before we do it ourselves. As Christians we can help improve the climate of our day by conscientiously checking our own tendencies to turn cynical, negative, and hyper-critical of our chosen leaders so that we don't become a “brood of vipers” or bunch of snakes like those who attacked both John the Baptist and Jesus in their saving ministries. (*Matthew 3:7, 12:34, 23:33*) Even more importantly, however, it's up to us to model in our own church life positive and constructive ways of doing business so that petty animosities and bickering never gain a foothold, let alone the upper hand.

Certainly all church leaders--whether lay, commissioned, or ordained—need to be held accountable to the highest standards of conduct. A church community like our own, which cherishes its congregational tradition, is healthiest where there is opportunity for questioning and even debate between leaders and people. Yet when all is said and done, church leaders need to be trusted, appreciated, and supported. They also need to trust, appreciate, and support one another.

Do you remember our installation ceremony for new Council members last January 31st, right on the heels of our congregation's annual meeting? At that time, new St. Paul Council members joining those already serving promised to exercise their leadership ministry “Diligently and faithfully, showing forth the love of Christ.” In turn, this congregation as a body committed itself to a partnership with its duly elected leaders, promising to love them and to honor and support their leadership. Those should not be idle words for any of us. By the way we continue to honor such pledges we make ourselves an example to our Downriver communities, our state, our nation, our world. Cooperation, rather than conflict, should be the model and paradigm in the conduct of all of our church's affairs. God is always going to be better served if we build on our strength as a community in Christ, instead of obsessing and fixating on the real or imagined shortcomings and limitations of our leaders.

If and when leaders do fall short of expectations, which is going to happen now and then, we need to respond as Jesus would respond—with a call for honesty and repentance. Yet as a people who know we are sinners who can never completely live up to God's commandments, there should be compassion and forgiveness in our own hearts for leaders who fall down or don't prove entirely adequate for the tasks at hand. Without such compassion and forgiveness for our leaders, born of humility on our part,

we end up as hypocrites. As Jesus rightly warned us: “Judge not lest you be judged.” (*Matthew 7:1*) As Jesus then added, we need to pull the log out of our own eye before we criticize the guy or gal with the mote or speck in their own. (*Matthew 7:3*) Yes, we can be too quick to judge and condemn our leaders. In the process, we add to the hurt of our community.

One of the best examples of leadership respected, honored, and upheld is found back in the Book of Exodus where the story is told of Moses leading the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt to the freedom of the wilderness before arriving at the Promised Land. Of course, in the midst of many twists and turns, Moses is roundly and unfairly criticized by his people for poor leadership. Amid their own fears and anxieties, they repeatedly blame Moses for the uncertainty of their lives. Pushed, pulled, and pressed, Moses the leader sometimes feels depressed, dispirited, and discouraged. He has a pronounced speech defect—probably a stutter—which may well be exacerbated by stress. (*Exodus 4:1, 10*) Consequently, Moses with his own so-called “uncircumcised lips” begins to seriously doubt his own ability to speak for God and to effectively lead those whom even God calls a “stiff-necked” people. (*Exodus 17:2-4, 32:9; 33:3-5*)

Nevertheless, the faithful Moses perseveres as leader. Moreover, at a critical time when the Hebrew people are militarily threatened by the Amalekites, they rally around Moses as their leader. Indeed, as Joshua, serving as the Hebrew’s military general, goes into physical combat against the Amalekites in a valley below, Moses goes up to a mountain top to invoke God’s help for their deliverance and victory over the enemy. Yet Moses is not on that mountaintop alone. Two assistant leaders, Aaron and Hur, are at his side. When Moses becomes too tired and weak to implore God’s help with raised arms and hands, Aaron and Hur sit Moses down on a rock and actually help hold up his hands to God. (*Exodus 17:12*) Old Testament scripture makes clear that it is the joint efforts of these three men in an appeal to God—not the fierceness of the warriors below—that turns the tide and wins the life-and-death battle of the Hebrew people. (*Exodus 17:14-16*)

There’s a wonderful double lesson here for us all. On the one hand, we need to have leaders who truly love God and are not ashamed to turn to him for help. At the same time we need to be a people who support our leaders and who want to help them accomplish their faithful and idealistic best. Part of the greatness of Moses is his humble willingness to accept help—the help of God and the help of two human assistants. But the Israelite people, represented by Aaron and Hur, also show their greatness by their commitment to help Moses out as he calls upon God. In the end, it becomes a win-win situation for the Hebrews and future Israelites. There is no way that the Amalekites could prevail against such wonderful unity and faith under the banner of God. Moses and the Hebrews certainly honor God in the way they call upon his power. Yet they also honor

God by the way they honor each other and work cooperatively for a good cause and purpose under heaven.

As Jesus taught time and again, God always wants us to work together in mutually respectful and loving ways—respectful of him and his teachings; respectful of one another as leaders and people together. This needs to be our way here at St. Paul United Church of Christ. In the days, weeks, and months ahead, as we find our way through the lingering pandemic and embark on fresh projects and endeavors as God’s people and Christian disciples, our responsibility as faithful leaders and congregation is to work for the common good. Let us honor God by honoring and supporting one another—and not least of all the leaders among us. May our own spirit of faithfulness and cooperation be one more light to our local communities, our nation, our world. **Amen.**