

“Stepping Into Leadership”

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Meditation – Adapted from David Sedaris

It was Easter Sunday in Chicago, and my sister Amy and I were attending an afternoon dinner at the home of our friend John. The weather was nice, and he'd set up a table in the backyard so that we might sit out in the sun. Everyone had taken their places when I excused myself to visit the bathroom. I thought nothing of it until I noticed there, in the toilet, was the absolute biggest - there's just no polite way of saying it - turd - I have ever seen in my life. There was no toilet paper or anything, just a single, abnormally large, Olympic-sized deposit that stretched from one end of porcelain to the other.

Disgusted, I flushed the toilet. But as though in official proclamation, announcing that I had just unfairly inherited a much more formidable problem than originally thought, the thing just rolled over, shifted position, and came to a halt against the side of the bowl. It did not go down. I gave it my best, 'you've got to be kidding me' stare, and, having already tried flushing once, considered leaving it behind for someone else to take care of. But I quickly realized, it was too late for that. Before leaving the table, I'd announced to everyone where I was going. "I'll be back in a minute," I'd said. "I'm just going to run to the bathroom." My whereabouts were public knowledge. I could have said I was going to make a phone call. But no. I'd innocently planned to urinate and maybe run a little water over my face, and now I had *this* to deal with.

The tank refilled, and the thing just danced around, taunting me. It was then that I made a silent promise. The deal was that if this thing would go away, I'd repay the world by performing some unexpected act of kindness. So, I flushed the toilet again, and watched urgently as the huge specimen shuddered, spun a lazy circle and turned over. "Go on," I whispered. "Scoot! Shoo!" I closed my eyes and looked up mouthing a prayer that this thing would just go away - but that would have been too easy. When I slowly opened my eyes, there it was, bobbing to the surface in a fresh pool of water. Just then, someone knocked on the door, and I started to panic.

"Just a minute..."

At an early age, my mother had sat me down and explained that everyone has bowel movements. "Everyone," she'd said. "Even the president and his wife." She'd mentioned our neighbors, the priest, and several of the actors we saw each week on television. I'd gotten the overall picture. But, natural or not, there was no way I was going to take the rap for this one.

"Just a minute!"

I seriously considered lifting this unwanted curse out of the toilet and tossing it out the window. It honestly crossed my mind. But John lived on the ground floor and a dozen people were seated at a picnic table ten feet away. They'd see the window open and notice something drop to the ground. And these were people who would surely gather round and investigate, then there I'd be, with my unspeakably filthy hands, trying to explain that it wasn't mine. But why bother throwing it out the window if it wasn't mine? No one would believe me except the person who had left it in the first place, and chances were pretty slim that the freak in question would suddenly step forward and own up to it. I was trapped.

"I'll be out in a second!"

I scrambled for the plunger and used the handle to break the thing into manageable pieces, all the while thinking that it wasn't fair, that this was technically not my job. Another flush and it still didn't go down. 'Come on, pal. Let's move it!' While waiting for the tank to refill, I thought maybe I should wash my hair. It wasn't dirty, but I needed some excuse to cover the amount of time I was spending in the bathroom.

"Here I come. I'm just washing up!"

One more flush and it was all over. The thing was gone and out of my life. I opened the door to find my friend Janet, who said, "Well, it's about time."

As I shuffled past her, I felt awkward. And I wondered. What had I done to feel awkward? The person who'd abandoned this thing had no problem with it, so why did I? Why the big deal? Had it been left there to teach me a lesson? Had a lesson been learned? Did it have anything to do with Easter? I resolved to put the whole thing behind me and not give it another thought. So I straightened myself in the hall mirror, regained my composure, and stepped outside to begin examining the suspects.

Sermon

(This sermon is respectfully dedicated to Dr. Helen Bishop, from whom I have learned much about the meaning of leadership)

Before I begin today, I need to ask a question. How many people felt uncomfortable with this morning's meditation? Or, at least, had to stop for a minute, look around, and remember where you were? And then, re-confirming that it was, indeed a church, felt a little taken aback about the image? And felt awkward about laughing? How many people were uncomfortable – if not for themselves – than for what they thought other people, here, might be feeling? How many? I mean, besides me?

I was uncomfortable reading it to you. It's not that the image is anything we haven't all seen. As the meditation says, we've all been there or, at least, had it explained to us. It's just that most of us would probably rather not have it explained in church. After all, we don't come to church to feel uncomfortable. More likely, we come because we're uncomfortable and want to feel better.

So, knowing that some of you might be uncomfortable hearing it, made me uncomfortable reading it. And I'd like to point out that despite what you might think, I didn't become a preacher because I like being uppity and making people uncomfortable. Or because I was looking for the most irreverent place I could tell my potty-mouth, playground stories. I was uncomfortable reading it, and I deliberated a long time about whether or not I should. For two reasons in particular.

First, I know it could cost me. I might very well hear – for years to come – 'remember that time Greg preached about the turd? Could you believe it!?! I mean, what was he thinking...?!?' And I know I'll get letters from ten different people letting me know that this morning was the Sunday they finally convinced their grandmother to come to service to hear what this church is really all about.

Second, I suspect that a story like this might lead us to sacrifice something even more significant than my reputation. For beyond even the meditation's penchant to make us uncomfortable, it makes it hard to concentrate on anything other than the image. And if that's the case, nothing I say in this sermon will make an iota of difference, or even register. All you will remember is something you'd rather not have known in the first place, and I will have failed in my task this morning of delivering a relevant message. And I hate to fail in this end.

Especially now, as we move into this sabbatical, because – as the sermon title might convey – I believe it is important that we recommit ourselves to the process of stepping into leadership. Indeed, that is why I think we come to church. Why the church is calling to us. To think about the problems before us. Recognize that there's a difference between the world as it is and the world as it could be. Identify the differences between who we have been and who we are called to be. And that means undertaking some important matters of change before us. All crucial matters of the church and it's people. But now I have put our minds in the gutter. And we stand before the question as to whether we'll be able to get past the discomfort and get on to some message that will help.

Which is too bad. Because I know many of us here have really been hearing the call of this church. Taking it seriously. Making room in their life to honor the call. Making changes. Telling friends about the church. Bringing your grandmothers. For many, that call was something that started in the quiet of their own heart. A voice within asking for peace. Asking for healing. A way to make sense of things. To find some inspiration or strength to make it through the coming week. And compelled them to come knocking on the doors of this church to help them answer that call.

“Just a minute...”

I think everyone here would like to find all that. But first, we've got *this* to deal with. This discomfort. This mess we didn't expect. Didn't deserve. That's not our fault.

I do confess that when I preach, I try to instill a little discomfort. Not for the sheer enjoyment it brings – well, not only for the sheer enjoyment it brings - but because without a little discomfort, we will never rise up out of our complacency and contemplate our capacity. Without a little discomfort, we will not be moved to mitigate our circumstances and migrate toward our growing edge. Move past our 'good enough' selves to discover our 'better' selves. And maybe discover something else in the process.

But the trick, I've found, is not to present that discomfort so vividly, or so strongly, that we become immobilized by it. That we can't think of anything BUT the discomforting image. For when that image becomes too big or too uncomfortable it becomes easy to just close our minds and tune out. Especially because most of the problems I talk about – most of the problems in the world, or in this church – or even in our lives – are uncomfortable. And largely because most of the problems – especially the ones we encounter here, in this church, are not our fault. They deal with messes we didn't make. They involve conflict we didn't create. Washing coffee cups we didn't drink from. Emptying bins of diapers we didn't soil. Preparing for or cleaning up after events we didn't even attend. Most of us just stumble onto most of the problems in this church. And when we do, it feels like we inherit a mess we didn't ask for. Didn't expect. Weren't prepared for. And we often greet such a scene with slumping shoulders and a sigh of disbelief. A chagrined look. Who left it like this?' we wonder. And we look around for someone to blame. Knowing that the freak in question will never step forward and own up to it. Because he's on sabbatical or something.

We might take a quick look around and see if we can leave it for someone else to clean up. After all, we didn't do it. It's not our job. And that reasoning is almost good enough to get us out the door when... we remember that call. That annoying voice we recall hearing in our moments of despair - that was asking for peace. That said we wanted connection. That urged us toward some sense of purpose. That told us to go to the church in the first place. And as if remembering the voice weren't bad enough. We also recall that we felt so good about it that we went and told others – about our excitement of finding a church. And a call... And if we remember, we might have even used that particular smarmy voice with a self congratulating tone when we told certain friends who are sometimes a little smug when talking about their own church... And we look down at the mess around us. And that's when we realize we're trapped.

“Just a minute!”

That’s when, standing before the mess, we brace ourselves and step into leadership. And when we’re done we try to wipe up all the leadership we can get off of our shoes as we grumble and continue on our way –now more cautious than before – trying to size up all the possible suspects.

That is what it’s like to be in a church. Even though we come seeking solace and renewal, we are often greeted with the messiness of the world. The kinds of things that will make us uncomfortable. And just like it is in this morning’s service, we will never heed the call of the church unless we understand and participate in leadership. And we will never participate in leadership until we can get past our discomfort.

I understand what that’s like. In 1989 I was in a very similar space. Feeling incredibly uncomfortable with the way things were in the world. It was around the time of Chernobyl and the Iran Contra scandal. Everywhere I looked the world seemed like it was in such a mess. I didn’t like the unfairness of being affected by problems I didn’t start and felt helpless to change. I felt disconnected and dispirited. I really yearned for some sort of renewal. Something that would offer hope. I really couldn’t take any more discomfort.

And I remember one night in my apartment watching TV and ‘the ad’ came on TV. You know the one. The infomercial where Sally Struthers holds up starving babies. And seeing children with flies buzzing around their open mouths, I remember hitting my personal discomfort threshold. Wanting it to be different, but feeling helpless to make it so. Knowing it wasn’t my fault. And just as the number started to roll across the bottom of the screen; just as Sally was asked me to get out my check book and get involved, I reached over and turned the TV off. With the remote control, no less. And I remember wishing I could make the rest of the discomfort in the world go away with a remote control. Or even the discomfort I felt inside. But I couldn’t. It just kept getting more and more persistent and uncomfortable. Until I could feel something in me, screaming. Calling me.

“Just a minute!”

And then came the protest in Tiananmen Square. And the photos of the pro-democracy demonstrators and students massacred there. That’s when I really felt the need for something to be done. If not for the world, then at least for me personally. That’s when I felt the call in a way I couldn’t ignore.

I had toyed with the idea of ministry, knowing that the church was one place I believed was making a difference – at least for me. And I remembered all the people from my past who seemed to have discovered a sense of purpose – a spark – a way of rising above the discomfort. They too, for the most part, were people who I knew from church. Many of them were ministers. And they seemed to have something in common – an ability to be in those uncomfortable moments and still summon some sort of peace. And purpose. What I wanted. And I thought that ministry might be what was calling me.

Within a couple months I had applied to Starr King School for the Ministry in Berkeley. A month later, without even waiting for my acceptance letter, I announced to my family that I was leaving to begin my new life in ministry. I said I wanted to feel better about my life. Do something that brought me peace. To that end, I quit my job, sold my things and moved north. 2 months after that I got, in the mail, Starr King’s response to my application. I was rejected.

In disbelief – in utter dismay - I talked to people at Starr King and to the ministers I knew. We talked about my application and about why I might have been rejected. The realization that I came to was that I

was mistaken. Not about seminary. Or ministry. But about why I was going. About the call I was answering. And what it was asking me to do.

The first thing I experienced as I moved into professional ministry was not at all what I expected. Like David Sedaris described in his journey into the bathroom, I went looking for relief and ending up finding a burden. I thought about turning around. Picking up stakes and leaving it all for someone else to deal with. But it was already too late for that. I had told everyone where I was going. I was trapped.

I realized, after much discomfort – and sitting in the mess I had made, and sitting with the mess of the world, that I was going about this call all wrong. I was creating a scenario in my mind where I was casting myself into the role of victim in the midst of other people’s problems. And I was asking the church to give me shelter from that. What I eventually came to realize is that one does not turn to the church – or to ministry – to escape the discomfort of life. But to engage it. And by asking the church to shield me from discomfort, I was failing in three important ways.

First, as long as I saw myself as a victim, everyone else would always be a potential suspect. And it’s hard to build close friendships when everyone is a suspect.

Second, I was failing to realize that even if the church were willing to do give me sanctuary from the discomforts of life, it would only serve as an enabler to keep me continuing to see myself as a victim. Someone who would continue to say that it’s not my fault, not my problem, not my job. And thus I was failing at becoming anything more than a good victim.

And third, I was failing at understanding what the true calling of the church really was.

I was given this reading from longtime minister David Baumbaugh, delivered at the ordination of a young minister. He said,

Once upon a time, we believed that the church and its ministry should equip people for the struggle to save the world. But in these days, we are content if we can simply make people feel a little better about themselves. We call it spirituality and focus the energies of the church upon the interior, the personal, the private. We call it spirituality and do not recognize that it is but one more style of narcissism. We call it spirituality and do not understand that it is not faith but self-absorption masquerading as faith.

All around us, our world cries out for redemption. We live in a world in which the few seek out and consume empty calories, while the many suffer hunger and malnutrition. We live in a world in which wealth continues to be transferred from the poor to the rich and to concentrate in the hands of fewer and fewer individuals. We live in a world in which the few lust after spiritual fulfillment, while the many drag out lives defined by despair and hopelessness. We live in a world in which the long-term viability of the planet is expendable, virtue is privatized and the ethic of the ‘every man for themselves’ dominates.

In such a world we have dared to redefine the religious imperative in terms of meaningful spiritual development, telling ourselves that once we have achieved a meaningful spirituality, once we have discerned our spiritual fulfillment there will be time to take care of the world.

Every fiber of my being cries out against this trivialized understanding of the church and its ministry. We have not been called into being in order to take in each other's emotional laundry. We have not been called into being to serve ourselves, to enrich our interior lives, to justify our narrow vision...The purpose of the church is the salvation of the world. The purpose of its ministry, lay and clergy, is to enlist people in a vision which lifts them out of dumb fascination with themselves and [help them] become part of an ongoing venture, responsible to generations past and to generations yet to come, for building a world of justice and peace, of mercy and hope.

To any grandmother's who were brought here this morning: THAT is what this church is really all about. I know, for me, it not only saved my hope for ministry, but my hope for humanity – and my hope for a place in it. Because it taught me that I will never escape my discomfort until I get over feeling helpless about it. And I'll never get over feeling helpless until I learn to do something that makes a difference.

I know the problems of the world are everywhere. They weigh heavy on us. We've seen the pictures of people suffering from the tsunami. We know the effects of terrorism. Of war. Of poverty. These conditions make us uncomfortable. And when they do, this church will not hide them from you. Indeed, if we do our job right, they will point them out. Sometimes in graphic and disturbing detail. Which is why I think it's a good thing that the ushers don't hand out remote controls along with the orders of worship when you walk in here. Because I know if they did, I would have been zapped into the netherworld ages ago. As would the people who ask you to sign up to teach RE, or to join in the Crabapple Rd. clean-up. Or blow the leaves. Or clean up the sanctuary after a wedding. Or wash the coffee cups. Or clean up baby puke in the nursery. Or join a committee. Or the many other uncomfortable things that happen in this church. The many uncomfortable things that this church is here to make sure happen.

In the netherworld – or the cornfield – or wherever it is that Sally Struthers or uppity ministers go when they have been zapped by the remote control of discomfort, you'll find a lot of former members of this institution, doing a lot of great things. And I'm sure that somewhere in that netherworld is one heck of a great church.

But here we are, on this side of the line. Trying to do what we can to save our selves – and this church – and the world – by dealing with the discomfort and heeding a call. And I am sorry if I made you uncomfortable with the story I used in the meditation. It would be unfortunate if I never expressed my call to leadership because of the discomforting image in the meditation. For then I will have failed in this worship service. But I think it will be far more unfortunate if, as a people, we failed to heed the call of the church and get past the discomfort and messiness within this institution that calls us to leadership, for then we will have failed at offering one another the only antidote the church has for making a difference. But worst of all, I think it would be tragic, if this church failed to heed to call of the world to address its discomforts and make leaders of all of us. For that is the only way the church will keep any of us from ultimately living out our lives as victims. And I guarantee you the story of the problems in the world – with war and poverty and corruption – make this morning's bathroom story sound like a nursery rhyme. If we fail to get past that, I wonder how we will get past the real discomforts of this world.

So I will step out of your way for the next five months. And give you this opportunity to step into whatever void my leaving creates – as well as step into whatever messes I have left behind me. So that you may step into leadership.

And let me try to answer that last questions: Does any of this have everything to do with Easter?

If by Easter we mean the renewal of people, the resurgence of purpose and the resurrection of hope on this planet – then, yes, your leadership has everything to do with Easter.

I will miss you. Be good to this place, and to one another. I know you will. You are amazing companions in this work.

To the Glory of Life.