

Isaiah 56:1,6-8

Matthew 15:10-28

Romans 11:1-2a,29-32

“Let the people’s praise you, O God;
let all the peoples praise you.” AMEN!

Lately, I have been wondering
what it means to be a great leader.

What are their characteristics?

Can a good leader be trained to be so or
is it something they’re born with?

Such questions can be answered partly, I think,
but there’s almost always pieces that don’t
seem to fit.

Sort of like working to put together a puzzle
and finding it to be unfinished and all
the pieces you have don’t fit anywhere.

Where did they come from?
Where do they fit?

It’s tempting in such times to simply say,
“It’s a mystery!”

We throw up the hands and say,
“Who knows?!? It’s one of those mysteries.”

And while that might be true, it doesn't mean
that it's a waste of our time doing
the difficult work together in conversation
and discernment about mysterious things.

This has been exactly what Paul has been doing
in his letter to the Romans.

In chapters 9-11, he's been writing about
God's character in hopes to guide the reader
to understand something about God.

One of his points, "disobedience leads
to God's mercy" is an important piece
to his argument, but then he had

to explain that this truth didn't mean people
should go about doing whatever they wanted.

His dilemma was that the Christians in Rome
were beginning to believe that since
the people of the Jewish faith didn't
believe Jesus to be the Messiah,

then they were forfeiting their
place as God's people.

Paul helped them see that the gentiles
were once outsiders and God's mercy

brought them in,

that same mercy from God keeps
the Jewish people connected to God's covenant.

So, together, Paul and the Christ believers in Rome,
they did some hard theological thinking.

The more Paul wrote, or should I say,
the more pieces of the puzzle he put together
for his readers the more he
encountered pieces that were
left to explain.

Still, it wasn't all done for nothing.

Paul could have written,
"Hey folks, it's all a mystery!"

But he didn't do that, he knew
the deep theological thinking needed to
be done and was worthwhile

because Romans is one of the best ways
to come to glimpse God's immense ability
to pour out grace and mercy to all people.

Even the disobedient ones, which is
really every single one of us. (Hm!)

So, back to good leaders and the question
what makes them so.

We may think of character traits like
honesty and integrity, they're sure good ones.

Compassion and empathy, yes!

So is merciful and humble.

What else can you think of?

Love?

Yes. That is an important one.

Very important, in fact.

If one shows no love then one will
never be a great leader.

You know something else that is important?

Power.

A great leader will never be one without power.

I was reminded last week of the quote

from Martin Luther King, Jr. who said,

“Power without love is reckless and abusive
and love without power is sentimental
and anemic.” (Repeat)

Great leaders must have both power and love...
love and power... and
must wield them with equity.

Which is easier said than done, right!?

Love is often dropped when persons rise
to power because “power tends to corrupt
and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

We don't need to struggle to see that corruptive
abuse of power in the world...
even in national and state governments.

(Pause)

We have sacrificed love at the altar of power
and now stand at crossroads where
banning books, firing teachers for caring,
denying the rights of women to make
healthcare decisions,
and land grabbing are
becoming acceptable things
to do.

Where is the love
that must go along with power?

Without it there's abuse and recklessness.

That's where we enter the gospel read today.

Jesus used his power with love to teach
the crowd about things that defile.

Yet, this is not a text for us to point fingers at
the Pharisees and conclude how bad they are.

In many ways, the Pharisees are people like us.

The Pharisees are like Americans who try to
do the right thing, but in the process...

We shun people who are different, and cancel
those we can't change to be more like us.

In other words, we say the right words but
our actions reveal a different truth and that was
what upsets Jesus here.

Jesus was upset because people were
creating roadblocks for others to come to God.

There is a correlation between what
comes out of our mouths, and our actions,
that reveals who we think God is.

If one acts and speaks with condemnation then
they reveal that's who they think God is.

If one acts and speaks racist or
homophobic ideology then that's what
they think God does.

If one finds it acceptable to shoot another person,
then that's what they think God does
from some far away place.

And it is wrong, for God wields power and love...
love and power... equally and perfectly. (Pause)

And we now come to the encounter Jesus had
with the Canaanite woman.

She's a foreigner and Jesus was on her turf.

Jesus made some stereotypical decisions during
his encounter with this woman.

He didn't want to do the right thing, at first,
but this woman had an understanding about God.

Maybe she'd heard about Jesus;
heard about him miraculously feeding
thousands and healing those who
came to him.

She'd seen or heard something about Jesus
that led her to ask for a miracle.

Last week, we were urged to keep
focused on Jesus (not Peter) during the
walk upon water, but today is different.

Here we are urged to focus on this woman,
a person without a name, and discover the ways
an outsider can show us something new.

She wielded love and power
equally in her persistence.

While Jesus seemed to forget
about love, for a moment.

Was it his full human side that came out?
Did he give some sort of test to the woman?

Or did Jesus need to be taught something new?

These are the big questions left unanswered,
but perhaps you're leaning one way or another.

That, beloved, is a correlation revealing
who you believe God is. (Pause)

The scene concludes with gospel news and healing
for the woman's daughter.

Jesus proclaimed she had "great faith."

Don't miss that last week
we celebrated "little faith" being enough
to move mountains, while here
Jesus names the outsider
with "great faith."

We are left wondering what
does "faith" mean here?

Persistence... yes.

Truth telling... yes.

But most important is that "faith" here
means she wielded power and love.

Power that challenged Jesus' inherent privilege
as a member of the people that
displaced her people.

And because of her, Jesus saw God, and we do too.

AMEN!