**February 23, 2020**

**Matthew 17:1-9**

According to baseball team manager Billy Beane in the movie *Moneyball*, a leader asks the right questions so that their team can clearly see both their problems and possible solutions. And according to Professor Keating, in *Dead Poets Society*, a leader is inspirational, encouraging followers to think outside the box. Doris Kearns Goodwin’s book-turned-to-movie about former President Abraham Lincoln showed us that a leader considers different points of view, even those opposing his own.

Tod Bolsinger wrote one of the best books I’ve read in recent years. In his Canoeing the Mountains (which is about church leadership) he wrote, “Leadership is energizing a community of people toward their own transformation in order to accomplish a shared mission in the face of a changing world.”

For our fearless leaders who volunteer to serve as a church officer, this is indeed their greatest task: to energize our Sweet Hollow community to be transformed, and to accomplish a shared mission in the midst of constant change. Especially as other members and volunteers find themselves exhausted or uninspired, our Elders are elected to energize our church community. They are meant to light a holy fire in our hearts, inspiring us to connect to God and respond to that connection. And not for our own improvement, but that we might be *transformed* by God. Our Elders are like Moses with the Israelites in the desert, encouraging the people to daily and continually rededicate themselves to God who called them forth to a promised land.

And *then*, our Elders are meant to help us accomplish our shared mission – even amidst constant change. As members come and go, as people’s time and abilities and availabilities change, as our surrounding culture shifts, Elders are meant to keep us on track, following those shared goals which we have set before us. Which, for Sweet Hollow, is primarily being an active disciple of Jesus Christ. Our Elders are meant to inspire us to be faithful Christians no matter what happens in our congregation or the world around us. Our Elders are tasked with constantly asking, “Who is God calling us to be *now*?” and “What is God calling us to do *now*?” So then, like Moses again, as the years passed and the people complained and the promised land isn’t where or when the people expected it to be, Moses did not let them sit down or give up or make camp anywhere other than where they were intended. They walked for forty years to that promised land. I dare say that not one step of that was easy. Our Elders, too, must keep us moving towards the promised land. Wherever that is. Whatever God has in mind.

One of the great spiritual leaders of the 20th century, Thomas Merton, wrote in his autobiography, “You will have gifts, and they will break you with their burden.” [[1]](#footnote-1) Something Moses knew first-hand. The gift of leadership is certainly one which can break you with its burden. As you pour out your heart and soul and time and energy and passion and hope and love and persistence and blood and sweat and tears, you can find yourself exhausted – worn out by the privileged burden of leading a certain people toward a certain thing.

Our Book of Order states “To those called to exercise special functions in the church—deacons, ruling elders, and teaching elders—God gives suitable gifts for their various duties. In addition to possessing the necessary gifts and abilities, those who undertake particular ministries should be persons of strong faith, dedicated discipleship, and love of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.” [[2]](#footnote-2)

Leaders are burdened with “suitable gifts” for their “various duties”. They are burdened with knowledge and experience. At Sweet Hollow that means our Elders are gifted at changing lightbulbs and understanding budgets. Leaders are burdened with love and commitment. For us, that means they look out for members old and young, and place Sweet Hollow’s needs higher than other demands; some of them will commute into and out of the City, then come to an evening meeting before going home to rest. Some of them will interrupt their daily routines to attend to pressing matters of the church midweek. But most important, in addition to possessing those other gifts which accomplish various necessary chores, our leaders possess a strong faith in Jesus Christ.

When Jesus went up the mountain to be transfigured, he took a few people with him. Not all of the disciples. Peter, James, and John went up the mountain where they found themselves face-to-face with Moses and Elijah. A leadership summit at which God was the keynote speaker. God said, “This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him.” Without knowing all, without understanding all, these three disciples were given a gift. They were privileged (and burdened) to experience something the other disciples would never see or know. They were called into the heart of a shared mission in the midst of a changing world. Then they were sent out to energize a community to transformation.

But what about the rest of the people? What about those who followed them? Everyone else was waiting down the mountain. They never knew what they missed. The other disciples would also become leaders in the Christian community, but they hadn’t seen this glorious encounter. The other disciples would rely on Peter, James, and John to faithfully follow God’s voice and lead them to a larger mission and ministry.

Elders at Sweet Hollow are expected to pray daily and practice regular, faithful discipleship. We listen to Christ’s voice, as God demanded those first disciples, trusting that God will share with us a vision for who we are meant to be and what we are supposed to do. The larger congregation may not be burdened with those gifts. Our congregation may not know exactly what happens at the top of the mountain; but we trust (and pray that) our leaders are discerning God’s presence and following as closely as possible. We are dependent upon faithful spiritual leadership. It’s a gift to have people called to be such leaders, but it’s a lot of pressure for those on that mountain. And it can break you.

As we install Frank Sansone as Elder today, the congregation makes promises, too: to pray for our leaders, to respect them, and to follow as they lead us closer to God. Just as they promise to be good and faithful leaders, we promise to be good and faithful followers. Let us be supportive, curious, active followers, ready to share their load. Let us ask them hard questions to help them articulate what God is telling them and where God is calling us. Then let us humbly trust their answers. And let us try *not* to break them. Amen.

1. Merton, Thomas. Seven Storey Mountain [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. G-2.0104 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)