



# TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

*on the Branford Green*

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

## Leadership in the Kingdom

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

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This week's readings are a frustrating lot. That parable we just heard can leave a bad taste in your mouth." What kind of a leader is this King? It's clear we cannot read it as a story of something that actually happened - Jesus' parables never are but still, this is a terrible story. We'll get back to it in a bit.

The story in Exodus is the image of a spiritually immature people and an angry God - not a combination destined to turn out well. Moses has to step up as a leader and talk God down from a desire to blast the rebellious Hebrews into oblivion. I would like to think that God knows us a bit, knows how hard the human experience is and that God might have had some compassion on this raggedy bunch of people who have been uprooted, chased, scared out of their wits, faced hunger, thirst and the unknown. God might have said, "Moses, you'd better hurry on down there; they seem to be having a tough time." And indeed, they were. Despite the miracles that God had strewn in their path, they had given into a fearful sense of abandonment - not able to trust the promises that had been made. Without Moses right there, they felt rudderless, abandoned. They look like the quintessential "but what have you done for us lately?" They look ungrateful.

One of the frustrating things here is that we, merely following the readings selected for Sunday morning, are may not be aware that Moses has been gone for 12 chapters since last week's reading, which translates into 40 days out of their sight. He's been up on the mountain taking notes while God says, "Let's take those 10 commandments and fill in the gaps." There is a lot of time spent on an expanded legal code All kinds of things for which a person can be put to death, forfeit ownership of a slave or an animal or a body part. There is also a detailed description of the Ark of the Covenant and the tabernacle that God wanted them to build, as well as the vestments to be made for the priests. I like that part! God appears to be an obsessive compulsive Altar Guild. I can imagine the people on the ground getting tired of waiting through all of that - especially since they had no idea what was going on.

So they take matters into their own hands. There are all kinds of scholarship on what that calf represents. Bulls were a common representation of deity in the Ancient Near East - Egypt and Cannan. With Moses gone for so long, what the people needed was something to hold onto, to convince themselves that they were safe in their wandering time. A sense of

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security is a necessary component of order and without Moses' presence they felt very vulnerable. Not a fun feeling, perhaps we need to cut them some slack as we consider their actions. People need to be led by good leaders until they are ready to lead themselves. They weren't ready, they didn't know where they were going; they were new at this relationship with God. They needed help, not threats.

Moses and Paul were in similar situations - leading a group of people into an unknown place. I love our reading from Philippians; so much so, it was the one I chose to be read at my ordination. Within the lovely, familiar phrases, "rejoice in the Lord always" ...and "the peace of God that surpasses all understanding" is an acknowledgement of worry and anxiety. Paul says, "don't worry about anything" like the angels in shepherd's field saying "don't be afraid." Despite his absence, Paul is working hard to be a good leader - a non-anxious presence. What Paul has tried to do was to give them a road map, a set of directions, and a vision of a better life together in hopes that they would become leaders on their own, helping more and more people join in the love and freedom to be found in Christ. I don't say this very often, but good for Paul.

And then we come back to the ugly, violent parable. It begins by saying that the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. I think that that is where the description of the k of h ends. The rest of the parable is about how we respond to the frightening prospect of heaven, of existence without enemies, of banquets at which everyone sits together, black and white, gay and straight, rich and poor. This parable pushes the level of absurdity found in many of Jesus' parables. It's absurd because weddings were the greatest entertainment Biblical times. It was often the only time people would have rich food and leisure and no one passed that up. It is absurd because people don't kill those bearing invitations. It's absurd because people brought in from the streets to fill the seats cannot possibly have been wearing wedding garments. So what do we do with this? I propose today that we take it as an example of shockingly bad leadership, an example of a lack of creativity and total ignorance of how to motivate. This king was acting out of his ego - "how dare people not take what I offer!" So he tried to cajole and bribe them with a preview of the menu. Then faced with the embarrassment of an empty banquet hall, he said, bring me anybody. And then he didn't like what he got. This is as antithetical to Jesus as I can imagine. The parable reflects the frustration of the early church, knowing that you have something really wonderful and you want to share it, but not everyone is interested. They don't see what's so good about it or why they should make any effort to.

So what does leadership for the kingdom of heaven look like? It looks like joy and humility. Joy that is shared is magnetic. When it's authentic and unfettered, people are affected by it, each in their own way. Some will allow themselves to be drawn in; some will hold the sensation of encountered joy in their hearts but not act on it till much later. The humility of leadership calls us to be prepared to accept that we can only offer-we cannot coerce.

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Leadership for the kingdom of heaven doesn't give up and consign people to the outside, it lets them be where they are. It continues to invite through relationship and a continued commitment to joy in the face of rejection. Good leadership for the kingdom of heaven holds onto the vision of a world that gives up violence; that practices radical generosity and extravagant hospitality. Good leaders lead by example, by living as if the kingdom has already come. To do that, some things may need to be turned on their heads, like our rush to use punishment in too many circumstances - from our overcrowded prisons to timeouts for our children. A friend posted a link to an article about the ineffectiveness of using timeouts for children who are misbehaving. Research is showing that sending them into the corner is not achieving the results that we want; indeed, it may be sowing unintended seeds. However, if we take (if we can take) the time to try something different we will teach a very different lesson. Sitting with a child who has just done something rude, obnoxious, or violent and helping them let the swirling emotions cycle down in the safety of your non-anxious, non-reactive presence teaches them that even if they misbehave, they have not lost your love; they can learn to control big emotions in safety. Timeout teaches just the opposite - it says, if you mess up - I will put you somewhere alone - which can look an awful lot like abandonment - a primal fear for children and just like the Israelites feeling abandoned by Moses. We tell them that strong emotion makes them unacceptable. We can do better than that.

Think of how we treat too many non-violent offenders. Rather than be a non-anxious presence that can provide rehabilitation, we tell them that they are not fit for society. We throw them into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. We can do better than that. We can be leaders for the kingdom of heaven here on earth. Think about that. God doesn't give up on us, why should we give up on each other? Try something radical the next time you encounter a situation that could use a non-anxious presence. Exercise leadership for God's kingdom and you might just experience the peace of God that surpasses all understanding.

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