

23 February 2025

Embracing Our Weird: Weird Leadership

Mark 10:35-45

While I was working on this sermon, I was trying to remember the name of a conference leader in my past, so I Googled “church consultants, John.” I didn’t find him, but an article popped up called “Four Paths to Becoming a Church Consultant.” So I looked. It was written by a professional church consultant who said he was getting so many emails from pastors wanting to move to consultancy that he wanted to just put his advice out there. The first path he called “The Path of Integrity.” Which is interesting. That implies that integrity is not necessary for the other three paths. Whew. By the end of the article, though, it was clear that he was writing tongue-in-cheek. His point was, “Unless you are already an experienced, recognized pastor of a large church who has written books on the subject, don’t bother trying.” It wasn’t really subtle – the last option was called “Path 4: The Path of Crash and Burn” – but still a lot of people missed it. I looked at the comment section, and it was all from pastors who said “Thanks for this advice! I’ve been *thinking* about becoming a consultant.” A *lot* of people there wanting out of the pastorate.

They aren’t alone. A Barna survey a couple of years ago found that 42% of pastors were seriously thinking about throwing in the towel. Another study found that 91% of pastors said they had experienced some level of burnout, while 18% percent described themselves as “fried to a crisp.” (That’s apparently the last level of the official scientific burnout scale.) Those numbers are even worse for female clergy and for pastors of either sex who are just starting out. One study projects that 80% of current pastors will have left the pastorate within ten years. I’m guessing that includes retirements, but that’s still a lot. And they aren’t being replaced at the same rate. Yet another study says brand new ministers, just out of seminary, last in the profession for an average of five years. No, I don’t know how reliable all this data is, or what methods were used in gathering it, but what I can tell you with confidence is there is a clergy crisis in the US. Pastors are retiring, or just leaving, and are not being replaced.

It’s so bad that two Christian sociologists recently completed a multi-year study, interviewing pastors who had left or were seeking to leave, asking them why. They summarize their findings in their book *Stuck: Why Clergy Are Alienated from Their Calling, Congregation, and Career*. Briefly, they identify three interlocking factors. First, capitalism. The church in America has adopted the goals, organizational style, and values of corporate capitalism. The goal of the American church is to grow, to attract new customers (and their income). Toward that end, evangelism has become marketing, and ministers have become managers. Terms like “Executive Pastor” have appeared, as has the concept of “church consultant.” The second factor is what they call “Social Darwinism,” which is to say “survival of the fittest.” Churches see themselves in desperate competition with other churches for the available religious consumers. Third, and finally, continuing secularization. That is, despite all our best efforts at marketing ourselves and shaping ourselves for target demographics and making ourselves more appealing than the church down the road, it’s not working. Fewer people are in church every year. Put those three things together, and you have a perfect recipe for profound clergy depression. People who felt a calling to share the Good News of Christ, got into the ministerial workforce and found that they were going to be evaluated on recruitment productivity and financial bottom lines. Then they watched as those numbers declined year after year and concluded they were failures. As one of my best

friends in ministry once said to me, “Why would God call me to do something that I do so badly?” Let’s read our scripture: Mark 10, verses 35-45.

³⁵James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, ‘Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.’³⁶And he said to them, ‘What is it you want me to do for you?’³⁷And they said to him, ‘Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.’³⁸But Jesus said to them, ‘You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?’³⁹They replied, ‘We are able.’ Then Jesus said to them, ‘The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized;’⁴⁰but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.’

⁴¹When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John.⁴²So Jesus called them and said to them, ‘You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them.’⁴³But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant,⁴⁴and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.⁴⁵For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.’

So, first of all, we need to note that we can’t just blame corporate capitalistic culture for all our assumptions about Christian leadership. Even during Jesus’ lifetime, his disciples were jockeying for position. James and John didn’t have our corporate vocabulary, but if they had, they would have been asking if they could be executive vice presidents in Jesus, Inc. But it isn’t just James and John, either. As soon as the other ten disciples get wind of this, they are outraged: not, apparently, because James and John had completely misunderstood Jesus’ teaching and example, but because James and John had called dibs on the corner offices before the others had even thought of it. They all seem to share the same idea: that following Jesus will involve a hierarchical organizational structure, with perks and privileges awarded to those higher up on the flow chart. And they all think they should be on the executive suite. But Jesus tells them, *You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.*

Think with me for a minute about what that remarkable teaching would mean if anyone actually took it seriously. It would mean that the true leaders of the church would not be the ones who direct things, but the ones who model Christ’s humility. The qualifications for being honored in church would have nothing to do with how many talents or gifts a person has, or how much training or education, but would have everything to do with personal integrity. (By the way, this isn’t just Jesus. The epistles of 1 Timothy and Titus both have lists of qualifications for elders and deacons in the church, and those lists contain not one word about specific abilities or skills. They, too, are all about character.) In Christ’s church, the one who should be honored is not the one who can preach an interesting sermon, but the one whose life is characterized by constant prayer; not the one who knows a lot about the Bible, but the one whose relationships with others are strong and loving and respectful; not the one who can organize groups and administer programs effectively but the one who won’t gossip. Those are our leaders, according to Jesus. Those are the people who set our path for us, who show the way.

Now understand, I'm not saying that we don't need people who are good administrators or teachers, or that people's gifts and talents aren't important. They are. People with skills and talents can be quite useful, like indoor plumbing. I'm just saying that in the weird, inverted pyramid flow chart of Christ's kingdom, those gifts and talents are not reasons to honor people. In Christ's church, our greatest honor should be given first to those who don't seek it. Our admiration should be given above all to those who serve others quietly and without fuss and who are loved by others simply because they started it. Every church I have ever been in has those people. They aren't usually pastors. Leadership in Christ's church has nothing to do with position.

We've been talking this past six weeks about ways that we, as followers of Christ, should appear weird within the context of our larger society. Well, here's a big one. People should look at us and see a hierarchy of honor that is the exact opposite of what we see in our culture as a whole. In our society, we honor loud people, forceful people, rich people, pretty people, ambitious people, successful people, and sometimes talented people, provided that they have the kinds of talents that also make them rich. In Christ's scale of values, none of that is supposed to count for squat. But of course, we aren't there, are we? The Church's scale of values is more like a mirror image of the values of our society, and that has pretty much always been the case. The only times in church history when we have approximated Christ's view of Christian leadership is when the church has been small and persecuted. Then it didn't matter so much how gifted someone was. Then, what mattered was whether someone's life reflected Christ, because what Christians needed was an example of faith to hold on to. But as soon as churches started to get bigger and more influential, they adopted whatever their society's power structure looked like and made it their own. The Roman Catholic church is still operating with the basic structure of the third century Roman Empire, and the quintessentially American United Methodist Church operates as if it were a corporation with a Board of Directors in Nashville and regional Vice-Presidents overseeing local franchises. And, to be honest, I don't have any idea what anyone could do to change that, or even if it's possible. Maybe once churches reach a particular size they have no choice but to develop management hierarchies. I don't know.

But here's what we can do. First, we should think of those people in this congregation who are living examples of Christ's self-giving and humility. I could name several of them, but I won't. Being who they are, they would hate it. But I don't have to. You know them as well as I do. Those are our leaders. Those are our models. As for those of us who have gifts and talents and training, we should be willing to use all that in any way we can to build up the body of Christ, but we shouldn't expect any recognition for it. It's just something we do. And if we do what we can just because we can, without getting any recognition, for long enough, maybe we'll get used to it. Maybe our humility will deepen and our hearts enlarge, and we'll start to be the kind of leaders Christ envisioned. That would be good. Weird, but good.