

Sermon- No Disciple Left Behind

Scripture: John 11:7-16

Sunday, February 17, 2019

This is the last section of the first half of John's Gospel the section known as the Book of Signs. We are in the last sign miracle of Jesus before his own resurrection. Last week as I was explaining the background I had mentioned the book of signs included the Cana cycle from chapter 2 to 4 and the Festival cycle from chapter 5 to 11. But last week there was some background information that I may have miscommunicated and so I want to clarify that for you today. You see before this incident with Lazarus the last major event that Jesus was involved with was his serious conflict with the Pharisees. You remember where it occurred? Yes, in Jerusalem. He had revealed himself to be Son of God there near the temple and the crowds around him were ready to stone him. I focused on Jesus' persuasion techniques as he talked to the hostile people around him. Then in verse 40 of chapter 10 we are told that Jesus withdrew from there and went to the other side of the Jordan River where John the Baptist was baptizing people. So it is this location that Jesus would have been when the message about Lazarus' sickness came to him. I did some more research and the sense that scholars have was that this would have been in the region of Perea which was next to Galilee, a place ruled by Herod Antipas. I misspoke when I mentioned that Jesus received the information about Lazarus when he was in Jerusalem. But the sermon itself was about the times when God's answer to your prayer may be a no or a not yet. I had said this may feel to you like the absence of God just as Mary and Martha might have felt but it is not God's absence. In fact often God uses difficult life situations to discipline us and trigger spiritual growth in us. The thorn's in our life have a very great spiritual purpose and spiritual value. Either that or God is doing something in your life that is beyond our understanding right now just it was beyond Mary and Martha's understanding that Jesus would let Lazarus die.

Let's move to today's passage. In today's passage Jesus' waiting period is done and he is ready to head to Bethany. So the first thing he does is, let his disciples know his intentions. "Let's go back to Judea". Now Judea was the hot spot for Jesus. He was about to be stoned in Jerusalem just a few days ago and so this shocks his disciples and his disciples ask him, "Rabbi, only a few days ago the people in Judea were trying to stone you. Are you going there again?" Jesus then responds by repeating a very important spiritual principle that he had already introduced to them earlier. The principle of doing God's work when the window of opportunity is open to you. When the window of opportunity is open, then all other concerns get overridden because if God wants you to act on his behalf now, he will take care of all your needs. Ok so what work does Jesus want to do here in this window of opportunity? Verse 11 says, our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep and must be woken up. Now Jesus was clearly using the word "sleep" as a softer word for "death". It was fairly obvious that Jesus was not talking about literal "sleep" because if Lazarus was just sleeping it would not warrant Jesus going over just to wake him up right? But to be fair to his disciples this situation is so confusing that by verse 12 they blurt out something that sounds quite stupid. Jesus at this point patiently clarifies to them that Lazarus is dead. Then he quickly switches to being cryptic again by saying they should be glad that Jesus was not there when Lazarus died because now they are really going to believe. And just as his disciples are scratching their heads he tells them, "come let's go see him".

At this point, the only disciple who speaks up is Thomas. He says, "let's go too and die with Jesus". Notice that Jesus' tone here is positive. He is upbeat. He is purpose driven. What would you say is the tone and mood of Thomas? Well Thomas has not at this point absorbed any of the positivity. In fact he seems really resigned and ready to die. Even if he is not hopeful, Thomas is demonstrating a lot of courage and is now ready to follow Jesus into a life threatening situation.

What lessons can we learn from this interaction between Jesus and his disciples? There are leadership lessons and fellowship lessons. Each of us will play both roles in our lives. And so the lessons for both roles are relevant to everyone in this room. Today I will address the leadership lessons. There are four aspects of spiritual leadership that Jesus is demonstrating in this section and I have organized them with the acronym LEAD.

The first aspect of spiritual leadership we see being demonstrated by Jesus is the L for Lessening fear. You see when bad news comes, the leader's role is to set the group at ease by explaining that behind whatever is going through, there is a spiritual reality. And that spiritual reality, if we could see the inner workings of it, we would see that ultimately it is something in which God will be victorious and God will be glorified. If you focus on that happy ending then it takes the bite out of the immediate situation. You see when the news of Lazarus' serious health concern came to the group, the first thing Jesus does is to remove their sadness or despair by elevating their thinking to a higher plane by giving them hints about God's purpose in the situation. Jesus gave them a little behind the scenes preview of the "why" of this tragedy. Let me caution you here. I am not saying when someone is going through grief you act all smug and tell them that behind their tragedy is God's purpose. Just because something is true, it is not necessarily the "relevant truth" for every situation. It can feel extremely hurtful to tell someone who is experiencing intense grief that their tragedy is happening so that God can be glorified or something like that. When someone is hurting they don't need to be given a lecture on the purpose of their suffering. They need to feel unconditional love to sooth their pain. Notice Jesus does not talk about God's purpose in Lazarus' death to his sisters. To his sisters Jesus focuses on giving them hope.

The God's purpose discussion is relevant to people who are a step or two removed from the grief. That brings us back to the disciples who were affected but not directly like Lazarus' sisters. Now what was their problem? Their problem was that going back to Judea would put their life in danger. And how did Jesus address that fear? Jesus

addresses it by communicating that there is a spiritual purpose in what is about to happen and a spiritual window of opportunity in which to act. It is the job of a spiritual leader to have an idea of the spiritual purpose of the next step, even if the disciples don't get it. Because from the disciples perspective, if Jesus is not fearful and is confident of the next step then they don't need to fear right? You see a spiritual leader starts by lessening fear because spiritual leaders embody the words of Ps 112 **6-8**, *Surely he will never be shaken. The righteous man will be remembered forever. 7He will not fear bad news; his heart is steadfast, trusting in the LORD. 8His heart is assured; he will not fear, until he looks in triumph on his foes.* Jesus never feared bad news. And whenever it was necessary he calmed the fears of his disciples. Now worldly leaders who depend on worldly power do it differently. Worldly leaders exercise power over people by instilling fear. The exact opposite of what Jesus is doing here. Jesus did the opposite. Jesus always reassured his followers. The first principle of spiritual leadership is the L of LEAD, Lessening fear from your group. You lessen fear by pointing people to God's big picture. And you don't have to be a prophet to know that no matter what the situation, God wins in the end. Lessen Fear.

The next alphabet in the acronym is E, for Explaining the plan. When Jesus heard about Lazarus' illness, he had a specific plan to respond to it. He stayed in place for two days and then he went to Bethany and when he went to Bethany he knew exactly what he was going to do there. Jesus was going to raise Lazarus by himself. He was not going to need his disciples help, neither could they help even if they wanted to at this point. But Jesus was not going to go to Bethany by himself. He was going to take them. And so to prepare them to go with him, he explains as much of the plan to them as he could.

Jesus explains the plan of what he intended to do to his disciples because he wanted them to be able to follow him. How did Jesus know what to do when he heard about Lazarus' death? We know from other passages that Jesus did not do anything without hearing from his heavenly Father. So Jesus prays, gets a good idea of his next steps and

explains all the next steps to his disciples, whether he needs them to do something specific or he just wants them to follow along to observe him in action. Because the disciples knew there was a plan, they followed even when they did not fully understand. Jesus lead his disciples by explaining the plan. The second letter in LEAD is Explain the Plan. Spiritual leaders need to explain their plans to those who follow, whether is it a simple household, ministry, church, or a worldwide movement.

If it was that easy, some of you may be saying. Because when you explain the plan, people are going to raise objections. The first thing the disciples told Jesus when to informed them of the plan to go to Judah was, wait a minute boss, just a few days ago they were trying to kill you there. So are you trying to go into this place where people want to kill you? That's a valid question and that leads us to the third acronym of the word LEAD, the letter A, "Address the objections". If those who follow are thinking people, they will process your input in their minds. If they are close to you, they will even share their objections with you. Sometimes the objections will come from ignorantly passing through a thought that comes from the enemy. At those times the spiritual leader has to find the 21st century equivalent of the "get behind me satan" response. Sometimes the objection might be a coming from human reasoning. "Isint that the place that we just escaped from because they wanted to kill you?" is simple human reasoning. When Jesus received a valid concern he took great trouble to explain some more details of his plan and reasoning. In this case Jesus' explanation was a bit cryptic. It did not say, exactly why he thought it was safe to go to Judea now when it was unsafe just a few days ago. But he did talk about the 12 daylight window of opportunity. In other words, Jesus was saying, there is a window of opportunity to do what God wants us to do and when God opens a window of opportunity everything else including dangers to life and limb God will take care off. The only danger Jesus was concerned about was letting the window of opportunity close and it become dark so that you cannot see where you are going. So Jesus does address the disciples objections to his

plan even if it was in a kind of unexpected way. The effect it has was interesting. Because if you look at verse 16, Thomas is not thinking that there are no dangers awaiting them. But somehow he is able to overcome his fears about those dangers. What is important to note is that as the spiritual leader, Jesus was careful to address the disciple's anxieties and fears about the plan. The third alphabet of the acronym LEAD was A for Address the objections.

Once you have Lessened the anxieties, Explained the plans, Addressed the Objections, the last spiritual leadership lesson in today's passage is the D of Doing. Plans that are not actually executed are just wispy musings or idea clouds that are blown away in the wind, right? So what we see Jesus do as a spiritual leader is that once he has completed the talking, he gets busy with the doing. This flows from the sermon our youth pastor, Pastor Abraham shared with us about Walking the Talk right? When Jesus was ready to do some "doing" he told his disciples in verse 15. "come, let's go see him". Couple things to note here. He did not tell them to go and do something he was not willing to do but always lead the way is doing whatever he wanted everybody else to do. This is very important. A spiritual leader leads by example. He also takes the whole group with him. No disciple is left behind. When it is a team activity, it is important to see that the whole team is involved. It does not mean that you can never do things with parts of the team. Jesus took only three disciples to the mount of Transfiguration. He only appeared to the woman at His Resurrection initially. Folks Jesus came to take the whole team with him to heaven, not one disciple was to be left behind. And so in everything that he did, he made sure that the whole team went along. As a spiritual leader who not just "spoke" but "did" as well he led by example and took the whole team with him. D is for "doing" in the acronym LEAD.

Lessen the anxiety, Explain the plan, Address the objections and finally lead by Doing. We are called to be spiritual leaders in our own circles and lead like Jesus lead. And in case you are thinking, you are not a spiritual leader, come and talk to me and I will

explain to you how everyone of you as a spiritual leadership role to play at some level. I pray that we can be a body filled with great spiritual leadership because when God calls you out into this world to further his plan that is what he has made you. His leaders shaped and molded in his image. Let us pray.