Reflections on Christian Leadership

by Peter Velander

The temptation to be spectacular leads to a worship of success rather than a devotion to faithfulness

Shortly after the September 11, 2001, tragedies in New York, Washington, D.C., and Pennsylvania, a gathering for prayer and unity was organized in my state. It was to be held on the mall in front of the state capitol. I would have preferred to stay away from this event - concerned that this particular mix of faith and politics might take some turns that would make me squirm at best, or be totally disagreeable at worst. But my son was in the university marching band, which was center stage during the event, so the parent in me overruled the theologian/politician.

Tens of thousands attended the event. There were speeches by political figures, prayers and statements by clergy from a wide range of faiths, music, the laying of memorial wreaths, and an F16 flyover. For the most part, I thought the event walked a fine line that called for unity, healing, and hope without sliding toward a patriotism of revenge or self-righteousness.

The most telling moment about where our collective consciousness was emerged in a single sentence spoken by the Rev. Mark Hanson, now presiding bishop of the ELCA. He said something like, "And we need to pray for our enemies." No one else said that - or even came close. People spoke out about not blaming others for the actions of a few, and not perpetuating the hatred that led to these events by succumbing to religious or cultural mistrust. But only one person said, in effect, "We need to pray for those responsible."

During a two-and-a-half hour event, it was only that one sentence that created a palpable rise in tension. You could hear murmurings among the crowd. Even a smattering of boos. Had Bishop Hanson continued to challenge the crowd on this theological point, I think it could have turned ugly.

What would motivate a person to speak of prayer and concern for one’s enemies at a time when national wounds were deep and open?

Leadership.

The position in which Bishop Hanson found himself is the position that every person of faith finds herself or himself in every day. It’s just that we often don’t recognize how critical those moments are when they occur on a smaller stage, without TV cameras rolling.

In our culture, leadership has become, in many cases, a carefully orchestrated set of behaviors that one exhibits primarily to enhance one’s career path. Leadership is what you do to get ahead. To be a leader you need to know how to play the game - whose favor to court, which sticky situations to avoid, how to take a position that doesn’t alienate too many constituents. This is the world’s way.

I think this “way” may seem all too familiar in the environment of the local church. The game playing can be discouraging. The “career path” of a pastor often seems remarkably similar to that of any management position in a market economy. Members of your church may have trouble praying for their enemies on the church council, much less the Taliban or Al Qaeda forces.

These realities don’t change without leadership – not the self-serving kind our culture values, but the servant kind to which we are called by Jesus.

In his book In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership, Henri Nouwen points to three temptations wrapped up in our culture’s approach to leadership: the temptations to be relevant, spectacular, and powerful.

The Temptation to Be Relevant

The temptation to be relevant is the temptation to please others. The temptation to be relevant is the temptation to use church growth as the primary criteria for program development. The temptation to be relevant is the temptation to compete with the world rather than speak to it in the name of Jesus.
Ministry Issues

The secular world around us is saying in a loud voice, “We can take care of ourselves. We do not need God, the Church, or a priest. We are in control. And if we are not, then we have to work harder to get in control. The problem is not lack of faith, but lack of competence. If you are sick, you need a competent doctor; if you are poor, you need competent politicians; if there are technical problems, you need competent engineers; if there are wars, you need competent negotiators. God, the Church, and the minister have been used for centuries to fill the gaps of incompetence, but today the gaps are being filled in other ways, and we no longer need spiritual answers to practical questions.”

In this climate of secularization, Christian leaders feel less and less relevant and more and more marginal. Many begin to wonder why they should stay in the ministry. Often they leave, develop a new competency, and join their contemporaries in their attempts to make relevant contributions to a better world.

But there is a completely different story to tell. Beneath all the great accomplishments of our time there is a deep current of despair. While efficiency and control are the great aspirations of our society, the loneliness, isolation, lack of friendship and intimacy, broken relationships, boredom, feelings of emptiness and depression, and a deep sense of uselessness fill the hearts of millions of people in our success-oriented world. (Henri J. M. Nouwen, In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1994), pp. 19–21.)

It is into this climate that Christian leaders are called to be relevant, not within the context of secular reality, but from the perspective developed through a deep prayer life that grounds one in the Spirit of God – the kind of grounding that allows one to say “pray for your enemies” at a time when every human instinct leads us in the opposite direction.

The Temptation to Be Spectacular

The temptation to be spectacular leads to a worship of success rather than a devotion to faithfulness. Tall steeple and faithfulness don’t need to be exclusive of one another any more than wealth excludes salvation. But the “camel through the eye of a needle” principle may apply to both in that it is very difficult to maintain focus in the midst of so much “success.” Envy is the equally damaging flip side of the coin.

Nouwen says that focusing on Jesus’ call to “feed my sheep” and on the discipline of confession and forgiveness is a way to maintain accountability to the gospel. This focus remedies the temptation to be spectacular. Leadership is not about being out in front alone. Notice the number of clergy who put themselves in that position only to fall hard because there is no one left from the community of faith who can say, “It’s the wrong way,” or “You’re straying dangerously close to the edge.”

What discipline is required for the future leader to overcome the temptation of individual heroism? I would like to propose the discipline of confession and forgiveness. Just as the future leaders must be mystics deeply steeped in contemplative prayer, so also must they be persons always willing to confess their own brokenness and ask for forgiveness from those to whom they minister.

Confession and forgiveness are the concrete forms in which we sinful people love one another. Often I have the impression that priests and ministers are the least-confessing people in the Christian community. The sacrament of Confession has often become a way to keep our own vulnerability hidden from our community. Sins are mentioned and ritual words of forgiveness are spoken, but seldom does a real encounter take place in which the reconciling and healing presence of Jesus can be experienced. There is so much fear, so much distance, so much generalization and so little real listening, speaking, and absolving, that not much true sacramentality can be expected (Ibid., pp. 45–46).

Being an “individual hero” is contrary to a theology of Christian leadership and forms a significant distraction to real ministry. There is a peacefulness to be found in serving that goes absent when we strive to succeed.

The Temptation to Be Powerful

It would seem that there is nothing in our culture that is valued more than being in charge. It is the temptation to be powerful. Which one among us has not bemoaned the fact that the church council won’t do what we want them to, or that the district minister, conference superintendent, or bishop just doesn’t have a clear
view of what's right for me? Which one among us does not long to control our own destiny?

You all know what the third temptation of Jesus was. It was the temptation of power. "I will give you all the kingdoms of this world in their splendor," the demon said to Jesus. When I ask myself the main reason for so many people having left the Church during the past decades in France, Germany, Holland, and also in Canada and America, the word "power" easily comes to mind. One of the greatest ironies of the history of Christianity is that its leaders constantly gave in to the temptation of power – political power, military power, economic power, or moral and spiritual power – even though they continued to speak in the name of Jesus, who did not cling to his divine power but emptied himself and became as we are. The temptation to consider power an apt instrument for the proclamation of the Gospel is the greatest of all. We keep hearing from others, as well as saying to ourselves, that having power – provided it is used in the service of God and your fellow human beings – is a good thing. With this rationalization, crusades took place;quisitions were organized; Indians were enslaved; positions of great influence were desired; episcopal palaces, splendid cathedrals, and opulent seminaries were built; and much moral manipulation of conscience was engaged in. Every time we see a major crisis in the history of the Church, such as the Great Schism of the eleventh century, or the immense secularization of the twentieth century, we always see that a major cause of rupture is the power exercised by those who claim to be followers of the poor and powerless Jesus (Ibid., pp. 57–59).

Theological reflection on the example of Jesus leads us to a different kind of leadership.

Ponder your call to leadership. How are you tempted to be relevant, spectacular, or powerful? Are you accessing the spiritual tools of contemplative prayer, confession and forgiveness, and theological reflection to keep your leadership on solid ground? What moments in your ministry are providing the opportunity to speak a poignant word or take a faithful action?

Nouwen closes his reflection on Christian leadership with these words:

What I have said is, obviously, nothing new, but I hope and pray that you have seen that the oldest, most traditional vision of Christian leadership is still a vision that awaits realization in the future. I leave you with the image of the leader with outstretched hands, who chooses a life of downward mobility. It is the image of the praying leader, the vulnerable leader, and the trusting leader. May that image fill your hearts with hope, courage, and confidence as you anticipate the next century (Ibid., pp. 72–73).

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