

## Lecture #3

### LEADERSHIP: DARING TO RISK

I have a great love for the ministers and the ministry. I have great sympathy for the ministers. My bias in relation to the various controversies in which ministers find themselves is with the ministers. It doesn't always stay there, but it starts there.

I've never known anyone in the ministry who did not enter it for anything other than to do good. Most ministers love people. Most want in some way to serve people.

My own years in the pastoral ministry I dearly loved: my first little congregation in the Berkshire Hills of Massachusetts – my farmers and business people and shopkeepers; and my second congregation of Boston Brahmins and small business folks in Newton, Massachusetts; and finally, for 32 years my growing suburban company of safe and well-off corporate leaders and other escapees from the central city.

We learned to pray together. We learned how to welcome and love people. We learned about mission – across the world. We learned to draw people to Jesus. We learned how to connect with people at the steps of this platform, and to embrace them and pray for them. We learned how to go into the city, to mix it there, and how to go ourselves across the world.

It was a wonderful ride – those tumultuous decades to be pastor in one great, growing church while America was going through vast changes in its life.

Bill Hybels of Willow Creek Church is right, that the success and power of the Christian Church is held with, and dependent upon *The Local Church*. We Congregationalists have always believed that, since the days of the Pilgrims and the Puritans in the 17<sup>th</sup> century Old England and New England: it was the church local where it really happened. That's where people live. That's where they come to gather week by week and worship. That's where they know and love each other. That's where they meet and know God. That's where their lives are changed. Jesus comes there – to the two or three gathered together in His Name and deals with them. It is, if you will, the locus of power. It is the Spirit's point of entry into the church's daily life.

And it is really from local churches that other enterprises go out. The parachurch ministries. The great missions to high school and college young people like Young Life, Intervarsity, and Campus Crusade. The great humanitarian aid organizations like World Vision. The great evangelistic enterprises like The Billy Graham Organization. The Colleges – like Howard, Yale, Oberlin, Piedmont. They all come from the church local – where actual people had a dream, and saw a vision, and went and did it.

But, while I love the church and love the ministry, I confess to a great sadness about the church – particularly the American church in these days. I have come to see there is a dark side to revival. There's a dark side to the church growth movement and the rise of mega churches. And I rejoice in what those great churches can do, and can give people. I've been there. I led such a church. I still fellowship with a wonderful group of ministers of the large fellowship with a wonderful group of ministers of the large churches called CUGM – Churches Uniting in Global Mission.

The large church has power. The power of numbers. The power of money. And the minister – “the big preach” – becomes a point of power – particularly of perceived power, whether he or she knows it, or wants it, or not. Others see that power, and want that power. They want to be near it. They want to share it. They may want to steal it, take it over, have it themselves.

Ministers of any church, but particularly of the large church, the successful church, the busy church (busy doing good, mind you!) are tired. Often exhausted and inevitably vulnerable. President Kennedy used to describe himself as living on “the ragged edge of irascibility.”

In the big church, when things are going well, and good is being done, and programs are successful, people by and large love the minister. They have some sense of the sacrifice he or she is making. They love him – they honor him. They lionize him. Not only do people love the minister – they can easily be “in love” with him. Or her. Relationships can be very complex for those who serve the Lord and serve the church, in a thousand ways.

And what has happened in the Catholic Church with predatory priests is a source of deep sadness for the whole church – and for all of us who love the church. But fallen preachers on the Protestant side are part of this, too. The newest, biggest megachurch in our town – recently famous for its new 4500-seat sanctuary celebrated in August on the front page of the Minneapolis Tribune – is now being accorded front page coverage for the fall of its minister-leader, caught in sexual infidelity. We are rocked. Hurt. Angry. Dismayed. And yet, not a minister in town has seen it and failed to say something like “There, but for the grace of God, go I!”

I know the ministry as life, a wonderful life. Privileged life. Sharing the depths and heights of all sorts of people’s lives. But, I also know it as profession – full of delicate, difficult, high, holy, -- and lowly– tasks: requiring all the experience and understanding, and skills any human could probably bring to a task (and this one is MANY tasks!) and I know that my Presbyterian colleague just across town – who also served his church 32 years – was right when he would occasionally ring me up, and say: “Arthur, this Senior Ministry business is IMPOSSIBLE!”

Which does not at all mean it shouldn’t be done, shouldn’t be attempted. Oh just know it’s going to be imperfect. Our performance will be imperfect. Our best effort will be imperfect.

You can only do your best, and trust yourself and your family to God. And I would add – practice repentance, and seek forgiveness.

I

### I Believe There is a Style and Spirit of Leadership That is Needed in the Church

It is a style, a way of doing things, a Spirit of ministry – that will most help the church to be faithful and true – and it is the style of RISK.

It is knowing that the nature – and really the work – of ministry IS RISK. It is doing the right thing because it is right, even when you cannot see ahead a necessarily popular, universally approved

outcome. It is taking chances. It is trying to see the truth, and doing the truth – and acting it out in love.

Jesus said the greatest love is laying down your life.

He said your job is to put me first! Imagine “He who does not hate his mother, father, sister, brother, and wife is not worthy of me. He who does not put me first is not worthy of me.” He is unequivocal about where He should stand in the heart of the individual believer, in the priority of the church, and in the loyalty of the minister.

And of course, when He is really first, and safety is NOT first, and COMFORT is not first, and CAREER is not first, then some very different decisions will be made.

And always in the end comes crucifixion, one way or another. And I mean that as readiness to risk one’s life – which for most of us, will be in the form of risking one’s job, or one’s achieved position.

I don’t know why I thought 40 years in parish ministry – including 32 years of reasonably faithful ministry in one place – would somehow end in a blaze of glory and honor and dignity. That issues like leading the Church to serve the poor in Africa, and taking a position with the UCC Association of opposing the idea of receiving a gay-lesbian church into our local association, and, finally, the teaching of the Holy Spirit as power and comfort and source of gifts for ministry in the church, would, in the end, bring the turning away of friends, and that leading the way to get me gone from my ministry, had not really occurred to me.

Till finally I woke up and saw “What could I expect? I am a follower of Jesus, am I not? What happened to Him? What was the climax of His ministry? What ever made me think mine would be different? Better? That I could get home Scott free?”

I believe that faithful ministry is always an exercise in risk. It is not wild, daring, foolish. It is loving, patient, faithful. The truth is that the more loving, truthful, and patient it is, the more RISKY it is likely to be.

And it seems to me, that is peculiarly Congregational. Because, in the churches of our way, the minister, the pastor, the parson, THE PERSON, is the servant present to represent Jesus, to being Jesus’ word to the people in preaching, yet he/she is only one person, one of the people, with only one vote in church meeting. Yet he/she is in every sense the leader – the one to see and articulate the visions God has for that church. He/she is the watchman on the wall, the one seeing, the one telling, the one warning, the one prophesying – and at the same time, the one comforting, the one loving.

It is perhaps the most easily misunderstood role in the world. It is always the ROLE OF RISK.

## II

But This is Not Foolishness. It is Faithfulness.

It is serving. It is loving the people. It is going to them when they need you. It is not work from 9 to 5. It is not saying "Sorry its after 5, my office is closed. My heart is closed."

Now, of course, you have a family. Indeed, if you've been so blessed, you have a wife, you have a husband. You have children. And yes, they do need you. And they are high priority. And you just do what God gives you to do.

A young woman phoned me once from down in the city. Something very frightening was happening. Some sort of drug confrontation was going on. She was in danger. She was hiding behind a couch. It was from there that she was phoning me.. It was three o'clock in the morning. It was dark, downtown, and dangerous.

Was I needed at home? Did I have a right to my own family, my own rest? Of course. But I tell you, it was my wife who pushed me out of bed. It was she who said. "Janne needs you. You've got to go."

I went. I bumbled in and somehow got this young woman out. She has become a lifelong friend. She became, through many trials, a great servant of the Lord.

She became a GIFT to me, and to my late and most important work.

So, in leadership in the ministry there is risk and inconvenience, and much that's not fair. Health, family, job – all share in the risk, in this NOT SAFE kind of work.

But I have learned that in this strange life, you are always GUARDED. Always WATCHED OVER, always PROTECTED – by ANGELS. ALWAYS.

They come in a 100 forms. They come as physical people or they come as spirit presences. But they always wonderfully come – and they make this Ministry Possible.

## III

I want to say that in the life, in this high view of the ministry, there is power in the example of the ministry

In some ways the biggest part of the RISK of the ministry as a form of Leadership, is that THE WORLD IS ALWAYS WATCHING. Especially today. Its interest is not really so much in what you say, or where you stand doctrinally, or even how exciting and interesting and entertaining you are. It is, DO YOU LIVE THE LIFE? Are you authentic, or are you a hypocrite?

People look, people watch all the Christians, but especially the minister. Because, in the old Congregational tradition he or she IS THE PERSON – the person. The one standing up, the one showing the way. The one testing the waters. Indeed, the one entering the waters. The one

going out onto the field to meet Goliath. You are the representative person – you can't accord it.

And when you fall – you bring so much else down with you. All the trusting. All the risks others have taken, all the sacrifices they've made to go on the Pilgrim Journey with you.

But the power of the minister's example for good is awesome! WHAT AN OPPORTUNITY TO BE THE HUMBLE LEADER. To be truly one of the people. Yet to be THE GOOD SHEPHERD.

That is surely why Jesus at the Last Supper, gave His Disciples the one great example to follow for the heart and spirit of the ministry Himself, the teacher, the Lord, washing their feet.

"Don't ever forget!" that example was saying. "I went to my knees. If I humbled myself, you can humble yourselves. You gotta serve somebody!"

When I was a student of Divinity in Scotland, I read the biography of Alexander Whyte – great minister of Free St. George's Church of Edinburgh. The picture of a life – of the faithful minister.

When I went to class in New Testament – James Stewart prayed before class and we were lifted to heaven. The lives of the ministers. They meant everything to me.

Including the life of my father, which is why I wrote a little book about him called *My Father, My Minister*. His life showed me what my life could be.

We are an example – even when we don't want to be. And others watch. And they learn. And they follow. And they, too, become examples. And the generations learn.

#### IV

#### FINALLY, THE KEY ROLE OF LAY PEOPLE

No minister ever makes it alone. No church is ever built by a minister alone. And no minister really takes the great risks alone.

The watchers, who come to love what they see, sooner or later step forward and stand close, and by their standing say, "I'm here. You're not alone. Not alone in your risk. Not alone in your stand. Not alone in your journey. I'm here, too. I trust you. I believe in you. Count on me. I'm coming, too."

When the great challenge came in 1982 to Colonial Church to go to Africa, to go to the dying there – and many of the safe were afraid, and wanted their church to have no part in such a thing – some came quietly forward and said, "I'm in. Count on me!"

So I always knew, I was not alone.

The lay people become the ministers in the world. They are the priesthood of all believers. They carry it out. And they learn. How? By watching, by coming along side, by living what they learn.

And so it builds and grows – this body of Christ. This miraculous church. The Mystical company – of which we are so privileged a part.

(Dated 11/1-3/2002)