

Sermon Shadow Rock UCC # 13 “Deborah, New Leadership” Judges 4: 1-7 Rev. Dr. Thomas L. Hall, May 11, 2008 (Pentecost Sunday, Mother’s Day)

Later today and all of next weekend you will have an opportunity to learn more about your next leader, pastor, spiritual director, and as some may like to say “CEO of the Church.” Rev. Ken Heintzelman and his wife, Peg will be here next weekend. Various times for conversing and learning more about Ken and his leadership have been scheduled and it is in your bulletins.

So, today, being Pentecost, or the Birthday of the Church, the time when the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples and some 500 people. The gift of the Spirit empowered the disciples to become leaders and visionaries. I always liked this lesser known and appreciated event in the Church. Most people look at Christmas and Easter, but this is truly one of the more important celebratory events for it speaks to the God Who is Still Speaking to us if we have ears to hear and understanding.

This is also in the secular arena Mother’s Day, a day some think was created by Hallmark so that more money could be spent on cards, flowers and candy.

Thus it is appropriate that we consider a woman who became a leader on this day. Who comes to mind when the words “female” and “leader” are put together? Oprah Winfrey? Condilizzo Rice? Hillary Clinton?

Many prominent women are writing their memoirs as well. Jane Fonda wrote “My Life So Far” in which she mentions her extravagant mistakes and asks the public to forgive her; Goldie Hawn, Kirstie Alley, Lauren Bacall, Tatum O’Neal, and Phyllis Diller all gave us books.

Books on leadership point out that characteristics of a leader are not dependent on one’s sexual identity. Lee Iacocca, former CEO of Chrysler, in the book “Where Have All the Leaders Gone?” lifts up curiosity, creativity, courage, competence and common sense for describing and evaluating leadership.

In his book titled “The 21 Indispensable Qualities of a Leader”, John Maxwell, known as America’s expert on leadership and founder of INJOY Group, which helps people identify and develop their leadership skills, identifies them. They are: character, charisma, commitment, communication, competence, courage, discernment, focus, generosity, initiative, listening, passion, positive attitude, problem-solving, relationships, responsibility, security, self-discipline, servanthood, teachability, and vision--and then defines them in ways that readers can absorb and utilize.

So, with all this being said, in the 21st century, what is it that Deborah knew and that we can learn from her? After all, she didn’t have all of the research that is available to us today.

Deborah, one of the wise judges of Israel. Deborah, the woman who delivered justice for the people of God. Deborah, a woman who commanded generals and elders. Deborah, the one who called the people back to God. Deborah, called “The Mother of Israel.”

Deborah was well known as a person of justice and fairness (4:4). She was able to call Barak, a man who could muster 10,000 others to fight in the war against Sisera, and tell him what God shared with her — and he was willing to do all she asked because he knew that she spoke with authority and wisdom. In fact, he was so confident in her ability that he wanted her to come with him as he attacked (4:8).

She was more than just “another leader” for the people of Israel. She had to be much more than that, to go beyond the cultural roles of women in her day and help others see what God had planned for them in their lives.

When we think of Deborah, we are reminded what good leaders do: They make the rest of us stronger.

So, let us look at Deborah and learn from her for ourselves and for our a role of leadership.

1. SERVICE FOR GOD For Deborah, leadership was not about “being in charge.” She didn’t frame her style in terms of Machiavelli’s dictum, “Better to be feared than loved.”

The counsel of former General Electric CEO, Jack Welch, may be wise, but it doesn’t define Deborah’s approach. Welch, in his book, *Winning*, says in his chapter on “Leadership: It’s not about you”: “One day, you become a leader. On Monday, you’re doing what comes naturally, enjoying your job, running a project, talking and laughing with colleagues about life and work, and gossiping about how stupid management can be. Then on Tuesday, you *are* management. You’re a boss. Suddenly, everything feels different — because it *is* different. Leadership requires distinct behaviors and attitudes, and for many people, they debut with the job. Before you are a leader, success is all about growing yourself. When you become a leader, success is all about growing others.”

Not that Deborah didn’t care about others. She did. She was a patriot. She cared about her people.

But here’s the deal. Deborah was driven by a desire to please and serve God. Her whole plan, her whole desire, her whole thrust was to please and serve God. We lose sight of that in our “get it now, and get the most” world. When we see this kind of devotion to God we think it’s crazy, and we even think that the person is a “religious freak.”

What’s remarkable is that as she is striving to please God, those around her become pleased. This is because she knew that by pleasing God, others are pleased; but when you seek to please others, only they are pleased. Her story starts with the idea that “we are in this together, and I am not the boss, God is.”

Sooooooooo, what drives us? Are we driven by money? Power? Control? Success? Things? Family? Mortgage? Are we looking for a leader who resembles us? If it is anything less than a desire to do as God desires of us, it will never make us or anyone around us happy.

2. SEEK GOD FIRST Not many can say that they know why they’re here. The search for meaning and significance in life is one of our strongest impulses.

But Deborah had no problem with this. She “used to sit under the palm” where people would come to her for advice and instruction (4:4-5). They recognized her as a person who had it together.

The text doesn’t say she loved her life. But it’s a fair inference. She moved easily among the political leadership. She wasn’t afraid of straight talk. When Barak asks her to go with him into battle, she says that she will, but warns him that “the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory.”

And then, perhaps with some relish she adds: “for the LORD will sell [our enemy] into the hand of a woman” (4:9). What’s not to love about that!

When you are in the place God wants you to be, you're going to love it. If you hate your life, if you hate your job, if you hate the conditions of your daily walk — that is on you, not God.

Of course, you might not be a Deborah accompanying a general into battle with 10,000 soldiers. You're a stay-at-home mom with three kids, hoping you can make it through potty training.

Listen to Tony Campolo's take on this: "When I was on the faculty of the University of Pennsylvania ... there were gatherings from time to time to which faculty members brought their spouses. Inevitably some woman doctor or sociologist would confront my wife with the question, 'And what is it that you do, my dear?'"

"My wife, who has given her life to raise our two sons and who, by the way, is one of the most brilliantly articulate individuals I know, had a great response. She would say: 'I am socializing two Homo sapiens in the dominant values of the Judeo-Christian tradition in order that they might be instruments for the transformation of the social order into the teleologically prescribed utopia inherent in the eschaton.' When she followed that with, 'And what is it that YOU do?' the other person's response just wasn't that overpowering." (The Tony Campolo story cited by Mark Adams, "Hannah — A mother's worth is never done," May 14, 2000, *Redland Baptist Church Web Site*, sermons.redlandbaptist.org.)

If you're in God's place, you'll love — or find meaning — in what you're doing. Like this guy we'll call John. After three years in a "six-figure" job, John quit to paint houses, because he was unhappy doing what he was doing. He is now in God's place as the happiest "poor house painter" (as he likes to call himself) in town. And his family loves it, too. The money's not the same, but life is better.

Seeking God first will naturally bring about a balance in your life, a balance for living.

3. CONNECTED TO GOD. Too many people think that in order to be a leader you need to have that certain "look." Or dress a certain way, or have all the right toys — the laptops, PDAs, picture-phones, the Gucci handbags.

But God doesn't care about any of that. God seeks the heart. Scripture is filled with examples of people we would never select for a position, but God sees past what we get stuck on. We get so concerned with the outside that we forget about the inside.

The text gives us no clue as to what Deborah looked like. All we know is that she was a "prophetess" (4:4) whose advice was sought by people everywhere. It wasn't about "looks."

Through Deborah, God was moving, working, acting and reacting, listening, judging and confirming. Deborah knew that God was on patrol and in control. She just needed to show up.

Another example. Liz is a gifted speaker, a wonderful listener, and one of the greatest hearts you'd ever want to meet. Her love for and her devotion to God and her desire to give her life for others moves everyone who knows her. She wanted to pursue full-time ministry and get ordained.

But Liz has some physical problems that kept her from being ordained. Her kidneys don't function, she's tied to dialysis twice a day; she has bone cancer, and some "growths" have caused some deformities. Her back is misshapen, she's very small, and she walks with a limp.

The ordaining committee for her denomination decided “people would not accept her as a pastor.”

Now, Liz is ministering to kids in the hospital who are dying of cancer, and she’s proof that God works through people, not through appearances.

Liz is a modern, personal version of Deborah; she demonstrates what God can do with us when we make ourselves available. Liz is now ordained through a local church, and is one of the most beloved chaplains the hospital has — because she knows the pain, she knows the heart.

4. AVAILABILITY Deborah was connected to her people, and more so to God. She interacted with people on a regular basis, and she communed with God. It is easy to allow a busy life to disconnect us from others, God and even self. But we need to remember that those connections keep us sane. Sometimes we start to place events over people, and programs over relationships. When we disconnect, for any reason, we are walking away from what God desires from us.

Deborah, on the other hand, was so willing to be connected, that she agreed to go with Barak into battle.

Which raises the question: How willing are we, how willing is Shadow Rock, to go to battle with others? Are we willing to get down and dirty to help others in hard times?

5. CONFIDENCE Sometimes we can plan things to death, and then wonder why they didn’t work. We over-plan, and under-trust.

Deborah had total confidence in God; worry was expended energy, as useless as a chocolate teapot. Whether it was dispensing advice, providing support, leading an army, or praising God, worry was not a part of the leadership strategy. She trusted God so much, that she was willing to place her life on the line when needed — without question.

The result of all of this, according to the text, is that “the land had rest forty years”

When we look at Deborah’s “life so far,” we see a person who models what’s needed in our lives, and as a leader.

When we’re not into power and control,
when we know our place in God’s world,
when we understand that God will do as God desires,
when we’re available to God and others,
when we’re a doer and not a worrier —
when all of that comes together as it did for Deborah, we’re going to be at peace and our “land” our church, is going to be at rest.

This is Deborah’s legacy to us, as a woman of faith, and as an model, male or female, of a leader. The Spirit was upon her and she was open to the leading of that Spirit. May we do so as well.

Amen.