

Toto: We're Not In Kansas Anymore, or The Oz of Leadership

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Ordination Sermon

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Texts: Psalm 78:72; Colossians 3:12-17

Greetings in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the peace and power of the Holy Spirit.

Do-do, do-do. Do-do, do-do. *You unlock this door with the key of imagination. Beyond it is another dimension, a dimension of sound, a dimension of sight, a dimension of mind. You're moving into a land of both shadow and substance, of things and ideas. You've just crossed over into the Twilight Zone.*

Da-da-da-da, da-da-da-da. Da-da-da-da. Da-da-da-da. *Long ago in a galaxy far, far away.*

We human beings seem to love being transported to different places. In *Downton Abbey* it was early twentieth century England. In *Game of Thrones* it is medieval times.

A tornado sweeps through the Kansas farm country. A girl and her little dog cannot get into the storm cellar in time, so they do their best to find safety in the house only to have the house swept up by a twister and transported to a very different place. By the way when I was a child, and we had only a black-and-white television set, I had to imagine what I heard was true, that the movie became color at that point. Anyway, the girl, Dorothy, emerges from her house into this new land, this new place with its brilliant colors and wild vegetation, and tiny voices

giggling. Looking around, she says to her dog, “Toto, I have a feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore.”

Harry Potter arrives at the train station looking for platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$. This is where he will meet the train taking him to school. To locate it is tricky. Only platforms 9 and 10 are marked, but if you are a wizard, you take a bit of a running start at the brick post and you arrive at platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ where you can catch the Hogwarts Express.

To keep these references multi-media, in an album released the year I graduated from high school, and yes, I still have the vinyl, The Commodores recorded the song “Zoom.” It had lovely lyrics and a beautiful chorus: *Oh Zoom, I’d like to fly far away from here, where my mind can be fresh and clear, And I’ll find the love that I long to see, People can be what they want to be.* When I sing it in the car I sound just like Lionel Richie.

[Twilight Zone theme] You are entering ministry in a changing world. The overall mission of the church, to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, that is to introduce people to God’s love in Jesus Christ so that their lives are different – more whole, healed, forgiven, more purposeful, more connected to others, connected deeply to God; and to move these people into working with God in the creation of a world that is more compassionate, more just, more caring. The overall direction of the ministry is the same, but the yellow brick roads we tread, the dark forests we wander, the strange meadows we traverse, the ominous mountains we climb are different. Toto, I we’re not in Kansas anymore.

One of the most obvious ways the world is different is right here in the church. The United Methodist Church is different just since the February General Conference. This fifty-

year iteration of the Christian Church in the Wesleyan tradition may be coming to an end, or at the very least is on the verge of significant change. It will not be the first time the broader Methodist movement has morphed into something new, but we are not sure just what this will look like or how we are going to get there. We have no yellow brick road and no good witch, Glenda or big-hearted Haggred. There will be a Methodism that fully welcomes and includes LGBTQ persons, celebrates their relationships, and offers the opportunity to be considered for commissioning, licensing and ordination. There will remain a Methodism that retains traditional positions. How the two will relate, or how many movements forward there will be, I don't know. I hope we might find a way into the future that is more zoom-zoom than like a tornado sweeping through.

The religious landscape in this country continues to change rapidly. Here are a couple of observations from a Pew Research Study (June 2018). *In the United States, religious congregations have been graying for decades, and young adults are now much less religious than their elders. Recent surveys have found that younger adults are far less likely than older generations to identify with a religion, believe in God or engage in a variety of religious practices.... But this is not solely an American phenomenon... For example, adults younger than 40 are less likely than older adults to say religion is "very important" in their lives not only in wealthy and relatively secular countries such as Canada, Japan and Switzerland, but also in countries that are less affluent and more religious, such as Iran, Poland and Nigeria.* Those who claim no religious affiliation in The United States is now 23.1%, up 1.5% since 2016. The trend is accelerating, but it is part of a long trend. Mainline churches have lost members and participants since 1965 according to Gil Rendle in his book Quietly Courageous.

In that same book, Rendle does a masterful job of painting a picture not only of our changing religious landscape, but of our changing cultural landscape. He argues that mid-century American was a unique time in history, when many social forces worked together to form a “convergent culture.” Such convergence of re-enforcing social dynamics is more aberrant than typical, Rendle argues. The success of the mainline church was its adaptivity to that aberrant, convergent culture. “Mainline American congregations thrived and grew in the convergent culture of the mid-twentieth century, and, in fact, religion was a source of the convergence of the culture” (Rendle, 35). Things have changed. We now live in a divergent culture, a post-aberrant, liquid culture where individualism thrives and we find it difficult to locate common goods, where institutional trust is low, where we find it difficult not only to agree about basic answers to questions but about the nature of the basic questions, and where the old social contract is frayed.

Toto, we’re not in Kansas anymore, and ministry in this changing time may feel a little like running into a brick post at the train station and finding that it is only a brick wall rather than a passage to a new place.

It is into this time that you are coming to be commissioned and ordained and recognized. It is into this time that you are answering God’s call to lead God’s people, and that is true no matter the order into which you are moving. Elders are ordained to Word, Sacrament, Order and Service and among the tasks is “to give diligent pastoral leadership in ordering the life of the congregation for discipleship in the world” (§340). Local pastors share in that ministry as licensed persons (§316). Deacons are ordained to ministries of Word, Service, Compassion and Justice (§329), and are called to “lead the congregation in its servant

ministry and equip and support all baptized Christians in their ministry” (¶328). We are called to lead, and to lead our congregations into being greenhouses for leadership.

Leadership as commissioned, licensed and ordained persons in this time is complex. Older assumptions and older patterns are changing, shifting, moving, but what is new is not yet clear or well-understood. Rendle describes the complexity well. “Leaders are now tasked with making decisions and directing resources in two quite different ecologies at the same time.... Leaders need to give continual attention to improving those essential practices that will allow the known forms of congregations to continue to thrive.... On the other hand, and simultaneously, the discontinuous change of the post aberrant time requires attention to the new learning and to serendipity about living outside of the norms and practices of the very institutions that leaders seek to improve.” (210, 211)

I appreciate the image Tod Bolsinger uses in Canoeing the Mountains, “no one is going to follow you off the map unless they trust you on the map” (14). What both Rendle and Bolsinger are telling us is that even though much is changing, there remain tasks to be accomplished and skills to be developed. Even if many of our challenges are adaptive, there are still technical challenges out there, too. You will need to sharpen your skills, even if we are not in Kansas anymore. Actually, we haven’t entirely left. We are stretched between the familiar Kansas and the unfamiliar Oz. You will need to care for expected tasks in ministry even as you create space for the new. You need to continue to improve known needed skills – teaching, preaching, administering, organizing, working with conflict, building relationships in church and community. Don’t neglect such things.

Yet as important as skills is who you are as a leader, particularly as we think about leading into an unknown future. As clergy, a primary task is to tell the stories of Jesus and invite people into God's on-going story. Gil Rendle reminds us, "there cannot be dissonance between the story that the leader tells and the life that others observe the leader living" (227). We often hear of the importance of leaders being self-differentiated and being non-anxious presences. By the way, I prefer "less-anxious presence." It makes me, well, less anxious. A few years ago in a book on church leadership, Lovett Weems argued that trust is essential for leadership, and the components of trust are character, competence and relationships. (Weems, Take the Next Step, 27ff). Notice how much emphasis is on who the leader is.

Leadership rooted in personhood is found throughout the Bible. Two of my favorite such passages were read. Psalm 78:72: 'With upright heart he tended them, and guided them with skillful hand.' It first captured my attention in the old King James Version: "So he fed them according to the integrity of his heart; and guided them by the skilfulness of his hands." Colossians 3:12-17 is about more than leadership, but it is not about less than leadership. *Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another.... Forgive each other.... Above all, clothe yourselves with love.... Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts.... Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.... Teach and admonish one another in all wisdom.* This is about leadership of wisdom, heart and courage. Yes, I am using the Wizard of Oz hermeneutic again – the Oz of leadership. I want to build upon what I offered on Thursday, but reemphasize that leadership in our day and time needs to be leadership rooted in personhood, leadership of wisdom, heart and courage. If our congregations are going to be greenhouses of such leadership, you need to lead with mind, heart and courage.

Cultivate a curious and adventuresome mind. Gil Rendle argues that leadership in our time requires leading without knowing, a call for curiosity. “A spirit of exploration requires both a firm conviction about the purpose and destination of the expedition and an equal awareness of what is not known about the territory to be explored” (232). Traveling throughout the state this past year, I often quoted the philosopher Martha Nussbaum from her book, The Monarchy of Fear: “Thinking is hard, fear and blame are easy” (10). Much in our church and world give strong evidence that we often take the easier road. I invite you to take the harder road.

Leadership of wisdom and mind is also deeply Wesleyan. In an August 17, 1760 letter to a preacher named John Premboth, Wesley wrote: *What has exceedingly hurt you in time past, nay, and I fear to this day, is want of reading.... Do justice to your own soul; give it time and means to grow. Do not starve yourself any longer.* Five years later in the Minutes of the 1765 Conference, Wesley wrote out a question and answer scenario: *“But I read only the Bible.” Then you ought to teach others to read only the Bible, and, by parity of reason, to hear only the Bible. But if so, you need preach no more.... This is rank enthusiasm. If you need no book but the Bible, you are got above St. Paul. He wanted others too. “Bring the books,” says he, “but especially the parchments”* (Heitzenrater, Wesley and the People Called Methodist, 2nd edition, 254-255).

Cultivate a tender and capacious heart, a heart of integrity. Mind and heart are not opposed, but partners in the spiritual life and in being leaders. The twentieth century theologian Paul Tillich once wrote, “Distrust every claim for truth where you do not see truth united with love; and be certain that you are of the truth and that the truth has taken hold of

you only when love has taken hold of you” (The New Being, 74). More recently the writer Adam Gopnik penned these words, “empathy and argument are foundational to existence; [they are] the real work of being human” (A Thousand Small Sanities, 239). Humble mind, tender heart. Adventuresome mind, capacious heart. The essence of wisdom. You find yourselves in a church divided, often painfully so. What capacity do we have for seeing each other in our human fullness and frailty, for trying to understand each other more fully, even when we might disagree most strongly, even if we are on the verge of creating significant space between us? You will find yourselves in places of ministry where people may be different and sometimes difficult. What capacity will you have for trying to see and feel into their lives and stories so that you can both be connected more deeply into God’s story? Colossians 3 in The Message reads, “And regardless of what else you put on, wear love. It’s your basic all-purpose garment. Never be without it.” Love is the basic all-purpose garment of leadership. Your congregations, and the places to which you are appointed want you to lead them, and they want to know that you genuinely care about them.

Leadership of heart is also deeply Wesleyan. We ask each person coming for ordination whether they expect to be made perfect in love in this life. For Wesley, following Jesus was to keep cultivating a heart of love. “By perfection I mean the humble, gentle, patient love of God and neighbor, ruling our habits, attitudes, words and actions.” (John Wesley, January 27, 1767 - updated by Steve Manskar)

To lead with wisdom and heart, to lead at all in this day and time requires courage. Gil Rendle argues that leading in this time requires “the quiet courage of learning new directions instead of trying to solve old problems” (215). It is also “a moment in which a significant part of

the substantive leadership of quietly courageous people is to stay connected to a mystery that lies beyond the capacity of problem solving, control, and determination, but can help people connect with... meaning” (237). The courage to court mystery is the courage to say “I don’t know.” Psychoanalyst Michael Eigen encourages us to hold “the quest to know, curiosity, wonder, knowledge of all kinds” together with “not knowing as an experience in its own right... a powerful state that can open us in unimaginable ways” (Contact With the Depths, 51-52).

Courage has something to do with not letting fear get the best of us. I frequently quote Parker Palmer from his essay, “Leading From Within.” If you’ve never read it, do. *We have places of fear inside of us, but we have other places as well – places with names like trust and hope and faith. We can choose to lead from one of those places, to stand on ground that is not riddled with the fault lines of fear, to move toward others from a place of promise instead of anxiety.* (Let Your Life Speak, 94). It takes courage to acknowledge our fear, and it takes courage to keep fear in its place rather than let it mask itself as a kind of realism. In this past year I read Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Letters and Papers From Prison, discovering in them these words about courage. In one of his letters written to his brother-in-law, Eberhard, about five months into his imprisonment in Berlin, Bonhoeffer writes: *For the calmness and joy with which we meet what is laid on us are as infectious as the terror I see among the people here at each new attack. Indeed, I think such an attitude gives one the greatest authority, provided that it is genuine and natural.... We are neither of us dare-devils, but that has nothing to do with the courage that comes from the grace of God.* (156) Lead with courage that comes from the grace of God.

Honestly, just your being here today to say “yes” to serving Jesus Christ through The United Methodist Church is an act of courage.

Gil Rendle begins his book about quiet courage with a story, a story I shared a few weeks ago with some of you. It is a Midrash tale about the Exodus. The Israelites had left Egypt and arrived at the banks of the Red Sea. The sea waters were before them, unparted, and there was much anxiety. It seemed as if leading the people into the sea would be to drown, but to wait on the banks surely meant capture by the Egyptian troops. Debate arose about who should enter the water first. The leaders of the tribes of Israel gathered on the banks of the sea to hash the problem over. Who would go first? No one was quick to volunteer, until Nashon, son of Amminidab, trusting that God would not simply have brought the people this far only to have them captured again, stepped into the waters. He walked in up to his ankles, but the waters did not part. He waded in up to his knees, and the waters did not part. He walked into the waters up to his waist, and the waters did not part. He kept going – up to his chest, up to his chin, up to his mouth, and just when he would have taken the step that would have submerged his nose, the waters parted. (Quietly Courageous, 4).

We humans dream about going to different places – the Twilight Zone, a galaxy far, far away, Hogwarts, Oz. When the world around us is becoming an unfamiliar place, we are less excited. But Toto, we are not in Kansas any more. At the very least we are caught in the whirlwind that is taking our familiar house to someplace new. And there is something in us that would like to hide in the familiar house and pretend that we are still in Kansas, maybe just spruce the place up a bit, but if we are to respond to God's call in Jesus Christ to let God's love transform our lives and our world, we have to step out. We need leaders who help us step out, who are willing for the sake of the mission to wade into the waters, step by step, up to the point where the waters part. We need leaders of wisdom, heart and courage.

One final brief story. The Hasidic rabbi, Rabbi Zusya said, “In the coming world, they will not ask me, ‘Why were you not Moses?’ They will ask me, ‘Why were you not Zusya.’” (The Spirituality of Imperfection, 2)

You don’t need to be Nashon, son of Amminidab, or Luke Skywalker with his light saber, or Harry Potter with his wand, or Dorothy with her ruby red slippers, or Joan of Arc, or John Wesley, or Billy Graham, or Martin Luther King, Jr., or Shane Claiborne. The wisdom, heart and courage that matter for your leadership, are your own. Cultivate them. Lead with them, all in the grace of God and by the power of God’s Spirit. Amen.