

Leading By Example

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Today is Laity Sunday. Each year, The United Methodist Church sets aside one Sunday in October as a time to celebrate the ministry of you – the laity of the church. Many churches use this Sunday as an opportunity to have a lay person preach, and I have frequently done so. However, to be honest, many pastors also use this Sunday as a day off, letting the laity preach, while the pastor heads for the fishing hole, or some other relaxing endeavor.

This Laity Sunday morning, however, I am going to preach to you about you. I have been your pastor for fifteen and a half months now, and I think today is an appropriate time to take a pulse and temperature check of the Body of Christ in this place. Perhaps we could call this a “State of the Carbondale Community United Methodist Church” proclamation.

I assess that our church is healthy and growing in vitality. Our church has come a long way; it has a long way to go. Much has been accomplished; more awaits us. We will share details of our ministry at the annual church conference in a few weeks. We will also lay out where we need to go and how we plan to get there. You already know much of this, but at the church conference we will truly celebrate our ministry together. I trust that we will all gather together at that time to do so. For today, I want to focus on how we have accomplished who we are and what we have done.

Forgive me for nautical analogies, but much of what I experience in life now I can relate to what I experienced during my career in the navy. Having lived in that reality often helps me understand my current reality. During the past 22 years of my ministry, when someone learns I had a previous career in the navy their reaction is typically like this: “Wow, that’s a radical career move.” “No,” I respond, “actually it isn’t.” Why do I say that? Well, first the movement of ministers in the United Methodist Church is just like the navy. While serving on one duty assignment we always had an updated “dream sheet” on file with our detailee, the individual who would decide our next duty assignment. That dream sheet allowed for three choices, numbered one through three. There was a tongue-in-cheek saying in the navy that you should list your true first choice in the number three box, because the detailers never gave you what you listed in the number one box.

In our denomination, a minister’s fate lies in the hands of the bishop, who decides where and when we move. And as it is in the navy, where you can’t tell a detailee where you are and are not going to go, a minister’s ordination vows include allegiance to the itinerancy system, meaning we will go wherever and whenever the bishop tells us.

There are other similarities between the navy and the ministry. A ship is a confined environment. I served most of my career on destroyers, with crews typically numbering around three hundred. With long deployments everyone knew everyone else. If members of the crew got along, respected, and worked well together, then serving aboard the ship was fun and rewarding, and the ship was successful in executing its mission. The same holds true for a church. If members of the Body of Christ are friendly and supportive, help people in need, and work together to achieve the church’s mission, then the church is a place of both spiritual and physical vitality and growth.

And then there is food. Because navy ships do deploy away from home for many months at a time, one of the most significant morale factors is food. Poor food makes for a grumpy crew. Most navy ships are known as “good feeders.” Fortunately for us, The United Methodist Church is known for its pot lucks, dinners, and for being “good feeders.” Our church upholds that wonderful tradition.

There is one more area shared by the navy and ministry, and I consider it to be the most important – people. A ship is only as good as the people who man her. We stress that every person aboard ship must know how to do their job well. If they don’t, others won’t trust them. In tight and rapidly unfolding situations, everyone has to implicitly know that the person beside them won’t let them down. Lives may literally depend upon it. But there also has to be an atmosphere of openness to new ideas and ways of

doing things. If a ship's command structure doesn't invite creativity and inputs from its crew, if it doesn't listen to crew members' frustrations as well as needs, if it doesn't look out for the needs of their families, then that ship will become stagnant.

It is much the same in a church. We all trust that the people who have stepped forward and accepted certain responsibilities have the best interests of the church at heart, will do their best, and will avoid rancor while fostering cooperation and good will. But it goes further than that. In a healthy ship, crew members step in to help out where they see a need, even if it isn't "their job." A church begins to surge forward when people who don't have titles respond to the needs of the church, its members, and the needs of the community and beyond by just doing, by just being the Body of Christ in whatever manner they can.

With all this similarity, there is one very significant difference between a ship and a church, and that is mission. We know that the mission of the navy, along with the other military branches, is to defend our nation and her interests. The mission of the church is spiritual. We are called to love the Lord with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. It is our privilege to provide an inviting and comfortable space in which to worship God. It is our desire to sustain and minister to our members. It is our calling to spread the gospel and to reach out to the world in love and service.

You, the laity of the Carbondale Community United Methodist Church, are doing that. You have coalesced as a church body. I believe you grasp within your hearts why we are here and what we are to be about as disciples of Jesus Christ. You have come a long way and now you are beginning to move outside of this holy space and enter the world to be the voice, hands, and feet of Christ.

As I have ministered in churches and observed other churches over the years, I have developed an axiom: *Pastors don't deserve nearly as much credit for a church's success as they are accorded; in like manner, pastors are not nearly as responsible for a church's demise as is laid at their feet.* In other words, folks, we are all in this boat together. It feels really good when everyone in the boat is rowing together in rhythm, and that is what you are doing. How has this happened? Why are you who you are?

Paul felt about the church in Thessalonica the same way I feel about you. He loved the church and was pleased by what he heard, saw, and knew about them. Paul commends them with great love. He "thanks God for them, remembering their work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ" [vv. 2-3]. How did the church at Thessalonica become such a vibrant, active church? The answer lies in verses 6 and 7, where Paul says they became imitators of "us and of the Lord." They became positive role models in the faith for others. The Thessalonians patterned themselves after those who had founded the church, and then worked together to help the church grow. They were led by the example of Christ and, in turn, they led others by their own example. Thus, they moved from imitation to leadership. Doing so created an expansion of faith. It happened in the church in Thessalonica; it is happening in the Community United Methodist Church in Carbondale.

Look around you. Committee chairpersons are leading by example. Members of committees are sharing the load. Individuals in the church are taking initiative and doing things without being asked, and without seeking credit. There is a palpable sense of community, of church, of service in this place. It has evolved to this only because so many of you laity are leading by example. Your love and efforts are infectious. All of it builds upon itself and the church thrives.

Here is a key reality – pastors come and go, but you laity remain. You are what makes the church what it is – or, what it is not. Here is another reality. I am a retired minister serving beside you as a short-term interim pastor. At some point in the near term, I will be stepping aside so you may receive a pastor who will serve with you in ministry for several years. When that time comes, I will trust fully in your faithfulness to God and in your discipleship, knowing you will continue to be the Body of Christ in this place, imitating our Lord, and leading one other and others by example.

A few years ago I read a wonderful book by Donald Spoto entitled *Reluctant Saint: The Life of Francis of Assisi*. If you want to learn what it means to live a life in Christ by example, read about Saint Francis. One of Francis's most famous quotes was one he offered to his fledgling order of Franciscans. He told them: "Go into all the world preaching the gospel. If necessary, use words." That is leading by example. That is living life in Christ. That is what you laity are doing here in the Carbondale Community United Methodist Church. I thank God for you. May you always continue to imitate Christ and lead by example. Amen? Amen!

- Pastor Richmond B. Stoakes, Carbondale Community United Methodist Church, 16 October 2011
[Laity Sunday]