

In her book, "Leadership Can be Taught" Sharon Daloz Parks recalls being a student of leadership guru Ronald Heifetz at the John F. Kennedy school of Government at Harvard. She was sitting next to a much younger student who was intently filling out an evaluation for the course they had just completed, surprised that he'd stayed for fourteen weeks. She leaned over as he was writing and asked "do you remember why you decided to stay? After a long pause, he replied, "that would be hard to say – leadership is a word that holds a lot of hungers."

Listen to what he said, one more time. "Leadership is a word that holds a lot of hungers."

I studied leadership with Sharon Parks, in a retreat setting at the Whidbey Institute in a program called the Powers of Leadership. Talk about a program in forgetting what you thought you knew about leadership. Excellent! Over the course of her career, teaching at Harvard and then as director of The Whidbey Institute west of Seattle, Parks continued to be stirred by that simple observation. As she considered the complex world in which we live, with competing social, political and economic values, she would assert many times: "Leadership is a word that holds a lot of hungers."

In her book, Parks would say two of those hungers are almost inherent in the human condition. Almost all people living a life of intention and purpose have a desire for personal agency. We long to make a difference in our world. We want to make sure that what we do in our lives contributes something worthwhile, has an influence – and in this sense, to lead. I know this to be true especially whenever I attend to a family telling the stories of someone they love who has recently died. They long to tell the stories of how that person made a difference in the world.

Parks also suggests that in all times in human history, there has been a desire for authority that provides confidence and reassurance, particularly in times of stress and fear. Think of it. When the world is at war, whole populations sit on the edges of their chairs waiting to hear how their leaders will exercise authority over matters which seem far beyond their control.

However in today's culture, Parks suggest three other hungers for leadership. The world is complex as a result of our connectedness. How do we deal with the worldwide economic systems when those systems operate in cultures with vastly different social and political values?

The pace of change in our world is breakneck. I bought a new iPhone 4 last fall because I thought it would be useful in my planning and keeping appointments. Two weeks later, Apple introduced the iPhone 4s which gave new buyers greater flexibility in digital photography and greater storage capacity. Not a big deal, but enough to make me wonder if my phone is adequate. And, soon the world will switch to an entirely new system...from 3G networks to 4G. The technologies and the applications are just catching up.

Finally, with global threats to our planet, and global threats to the health of earth's people, likely the greatest hunger of our time is for leadership that can exercise a moral imagination and a moral courage on behalf of the common good. Can we look to the any elder statesmen in the world who seeks the welfare of the whole world; statesmen with any serious political power?

Put yourself in this detail, now. Think of those five hungers in your own life: the desire to make a difference; the desire for an authority to create peace and safety; leadership that simplifies the complexity; leadership that moderates change; leadership with a moral imagination and courage on behalf of the common good. Even here at Lynn Valley United Church, it's not lost on me that leadership is a word, here, that holds a lot of hungers. Any of this ringing true for you today? What if I said, the call is going out to you to respond?

As I read the story from the Mark's gospel, I'm recognizing the same kinds of hungers. The challenge to Jesus authority (Who is this guy? Why, he's just the son of Mary and Joseph, he grew up with us...he's one of us...what does he know) is all about people's relationship to authority that soothes, in a time of chaos. The challenge comes because they do not believe Jesus has any capacity to make a difference in their lives. He's not really educated? He's kinda young. He's just a carpenter's son. Of course...I've experienced this in my own life, in my own career. A leader is not without honour, except in his home town.

And while first century Palestine was not nearly as complex as our world today, I'm intrigued by Jesus' response to the leadership hungers of his time - people clamoring for healing, for a new word about economic and social justice, and the political overturning of the tables of oppression. Wouldn't it be interesting if we

addressed the leadership hungers of the 21st century with the leadership solutions inherent in this story – found in both the gospel of Mark and the gospel of Luke.

“He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. ⁸He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; ⁹but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. ¹⁰He said to them, “Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. ¹¹If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them”

Look at this. First he sends them out by two. No lone rangers in this crew. No single handed authority. Instead he encourages teams of people bringing different perspectives, different gifts to a common call. Then, he encourages leadership that travels lightly. What does it mean for leaders to travel lightly in our world? I think leaders who travel lightly are unfettered by the baggage of what was. There is only what is, and what needs to be dealt with now. The way it used to be sometimes doesn't even speak the same language in our changing world.

Jesus also says “whenever you enter a house, stay there until you leave.” That may seem obvious, no kidding. But doesn't that mean stay until the work is accomplished? Doesn't having the authority mean using your gifts in service of your vision until that is realized? Small visions or large? When I think of the complexities of public education today, and the nature of employment relationships and the building of trust, I cannot believe the number of ministers of education who have floated through that office at the whim of the presiding premier. Is there any wonder we're where we are? Talk about a lack of moral imagination and courage, on both parts.

Finally, Jesus says to those who would lead, if those you lead, are not listening, do not get it, shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them. Isn't that too bad? It sounds like a judgment of their character. I'd rather read that line in a different light. Is it possible that Jesus is saying to his disciples “don't take this personally? Don't let this angst and conflict of style or content stick to you. Your leadership is not required here. Go where you can be more effective.” It takes great moral courage to recognize when your gifts are needed somewhere else.

Why did I just say all of this? Because I believe we are called to leadership in our community, as church, in ways the church has never been called. I believe it takes moral imagination and courage to respond to the community in ways that honor conflicting values in a complex world. As we continue to balance the need for spiritual grounding within these walls with the need to serve the community beyond these walls, the changes are coming at us quickly. We will need to continually see a bigger picture.

We will need to travel lightly. Can you imagine if we didn't actually ever own a building. Sometimes I'm pretty envious of the Korean congregation who simply rents our space. They come and go as they please and the worries of a building are not in their mission strategy.

And more than anything, we will need to respond to our complex world with a whole new vision of leadership...not the lone ranger who vanquishes the enemy. Rather, as Parks suggests in her book, the new vision of leadership is that of artist – responding creatively to that which presents itself, and creating something that is currently not there.

The hunger for leadership is in our hands now. May we be so empowered as God's people in this place, healing and anointing and casting out the demons of our time in the name of love and justice. Amen.