Which Side of the Fence?
St. Paul’s ~ Syracuse, NY ~ November 24, 2019

Which side of the fence are we on?

When Eleanor was three years old her mom was pregnant. Everyone was looking forward to the birth of the new baby. A few weeks before Noah was born, we visited Eleanor’s grandmother. Eleanor was excited about having a new brother or sister. Eleanor and her grandmother had a revealing conversation, which went like this:

Grandma said, “Mom is almost ready to give birth to the baby. Are you looking forward to being a big sister?”

Eleanor replied, “Very much. It will be my baby, too.”

Grandma, “Mom will probably be in the hospital for a few days.”

Eleanor, “I think so.”

Grandma, “And after the baby is born Mom will bring the baby home to live with you and papa.”

Eleanor, “That’s right. The baby will sleep in my room. We have the crib set up for the baby in my room.”

Grandma, “Then mom will take care of the baby when papa is at work and you are at nursery school.”

Eleanor, “No. I won’t be going back to nursery school after the baby is born.”

Grandma, “Why not?”

Eleanor, “I’m going to have to stay home and take care of the baby!”

Yes, at the age of three Eleanor was ready to take on the great responsibility of caring for a newborn baby. What really happened is that Eleanor did go back to Nursery school about a week after Noah was born, but whenever she was home she was mostly concerned about taking care of her little brother. Somewhere in a couple of photo albums we have about 1000 pictures of Eleanor with her little brother. Photos of Eleanor holding Noah in her arms. Photos of Eleanor reading stories to him. Photos of Eleanor pushing him in a little wagon. Photos of Eleanor building a little house of blankets draped over furniture, with the two of them sitting inside.

Eleanor had crossed over the fence. Before Noah was born, Eleanor was the little child who needed care and attention. After Noah was born, Eleanor became the caregiver. It was a stunning thing to watch.

Eleanor had crossed over the fence that divides the little ones from the caregivers. There are fences like this in many parts of life. Perhaps you remember a time, somewhere around your junior year in High School, when you crossed some sort of boundary that separates children from adults.

Perhaps you crossed the boundary during the semester when you were the student director for the high school play. Perhaps you crossed the boundary the day the coach was sick and you had to lead the team during practice. Perhaps you crossed the boundary the day when you started working as manager of the store or the restaurant.

There are little boundaries, little fences like this all through our lives. On one side of the fence you could make very big contributions, but you were not the leader of the group. You had less responsibility. Most of the time you were following someone else’s leadership.

On the other side of the fence you were the one responsible for making sure the job was done right and the rules were followed. On the other side of the fence you were responsible for making sure no one got hurt. On the other side of the fence you were responsible for being an example for others to follow.

We pay special attention to the boundaries that separate those who have more responsibility from those who have less responsibility. We pay special attention to the boundaries that separate those
who have less experience and power from those who have more experience and more power. We pay special attention to the boundaries that separate leaders from those who are being led.

This is especially true for those who take on positions of great power and responsibility. In many cases we have created special ceremonies to mark the time when a person is given a position of great authority. When we elect a new president, the transfer of power takes place in a formal ceremony. The new president makes a solemn promise to uphold the Constitution of the United States.

In most places, newly trained police officers participate in a solemn ceremony and take an oath to never betray the public trust, to uphold the Constitution of the United States and to hold themselves accountable for all of their actions. 20 days from now our dear friend and companion, John Rohde, will be ordained as a priest. During his ordination John will promise to work in such a way that ‘the reconciling love of Christ (would) be known and received (by those he ministers to)’.

These solemn ceremonies and public oaths do not guarantee that the new president, the new priest or the new police officer will fulfill the promises they make, but they are clear indications that the person at the center of the ceremony is crossing a boundary into a new place of leadership.

We understand the serious nature of leadership positions most vividly when they are given to individuals who fail to live up to the promises made in the ceremonies. When a police officer or a president fail to uphold the Constitution of the United States, the results are often catastrophic, and great harm is done to our communities or to our nation. When a priest fails to make care of the members the first priority, the results are often tragic, and great harm is done to the people.

We pay special attention to those who are chosen for positions of great responsibility because failure can lead to tragedy. This is the main idea of our passage from Jeremiah. *Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the LORD.* In Jeremiah’s situation the shepherds who were destroying the sheep were the false prophets, especially Hananiah.

Just months before Judah was invaded by the armies of Babylon, Hananiaiah was giving a false message to the people. Jeremiah declared a message of warning and repentance. Hananiah said, “Do not worry. Everything is just fine.” Then the armies of Babylon invaded Judah and laid siege to Jerusalem. Thousands of people were killed and the Temple was destroyed.

When leaders fail to exercise power with faithfulness and wisdom the results can be tragic. So we maintain clear boundaries around positions of great responsibility.

Twenty four years ago I was a new member of the Episcopal Church. I had grown up in another tradition. I loved the Book of Common Prayer and the riches of the Episcopal Hymnal. I was somewhat perplexed by all of the lesser festivals of the church year. The most perplexing of all for me was the festival we are celebrating today: Christ the King Sunday.

Christ the King Sunday comes at the very end of the church year. Today is the very last Sunday in the year we call Year C. Next Sunday will be the first Sunday of Advent in the year we call Year A. During Year A the Gospel of Matthew will be the framework for our lectionary readings. During Year B, the Gospel of Mark will be the framework for our lectionary readings. During Year C the Gospel of Luke has been the framework for our lectionary readings. On Christ the King Sunday we look back at the entire church year and we are led back, all the way back, to Palm Sunday and Luke Chapter 23.

I have to admit that for my first ten years as an Episcopalian I really did not get the point. When Christ the King Sunday came around I thought to myself, “I’m really not into monarchies. Why can’t we have something about democratic decision making at the end of the year?” For my first ten years as an Episcopalian I didn’t really get the point about Christ the King Sunday.

For my next six or eight years as an Episcopalian I was more like, “OK, OK, I think I get it. Christ’s rule of love is so much better than any of the rules we come up with. Christ is our king. But do we have to read this terrible part of the story again, the part where Jesus is hanging on the cross in terrible pain and he is being mocked by everyone?” For my next bunch of years as an Episcopalian,
which I would point out, included going to seminary and being ordained, I still didn’t really get the point about Christ the King Sunday.

It has only been during the last several years that I may have begun to understand. I guess it is a difficult lesson, at least for me. Christ the King turns all of our ideas of kingship and leadership upside down. For those who follow Christ, leaders are those who serve. Leaders give away their power and empower others. Leaders are not full of judgment, they are full of compassion. Being a leader does not mean one is entitled to a cushy upholstered chair. Being a leader sometimes means something closer to a wooden cross.

Seen in this light, we need to consider again which side of the fence we are on. Like the three-year old girl with the blond braids and the big words, we might step across that line for a while and be the big sister. We might spend a few years taking on the responsibilities of leadership. We might follow the example of Christ and try to be servant leaders, giving up our power to those we serve.

In the long game of life, in our journey with God, we are not the leaders. We are on the other side of the fence. We look for guidance to the one who is the rock of our salvation. We take our strength from the one in whom we live and move and have our being.

For brief periods of our lives, five or ten or twenty years, we may cross over that fence and act as shepherds. We might be leading a team at work or leading a classroom full of students. We might be running the company or running the Sunday School class. When we do, we try to follow the example of Christ, our king. We do things that turn the world’s notion of leadership upside down. When we follow the example of Christ, we give away our power and empower others. We act with compassion, not judgment. We act as servants for God’s people.