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## **“Choose Carefully Whom to Follow”**

**A sermon by Mark E. Diehl**

**Fifth Sunday of Easter (Year A)**

**May 18, 2014**

**Philippians 3:17-4:1, Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16**

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A crisis of leadership assails the world today. This crisis of leadership is acutely felt in America and in the Christian church, although it is not limited to the US political system or American Christianity. You can find it in higher education as well as in local school boards, in international economics as well as among investment advisors. You can observe it in private industry as well as in the not-for-profit sector, in civic organizations as well as in scientific and medical communities.

At its core, the crisis of leadership is that people—that you and I—that we don’t know whom to trust anymore.

The guideposts that gave us some sense of stability in the past have proven to be unreliable. For some, that stability might have been provided by political affiliation and party involvement, by theological belief or denominational membership, by racial heritage or ethnic background. For others, maintaining an exemplary work ethic and loyalty to one’s employer might have provided stability. Perhaps that stability was provided by regional identity, or socio-economic status, or confidence in educational attainment, or the basic goodness of people, or the ultimate triumph of democracy, or the attainment of the American dream.

Today it seems that every virtue upon which people have relied in the past has been undermined, every institution of longevity has been undercut, and every authority has been proven flawed.

We don't know whom or what to trust anymore.

Such lack of trust is the result of many toxic forces at work in our world today. Money and influence and power are the primary values that drive our world, and it is those values on which most decisions are based. Institutions and people have been corrupted by the singular devotion to such values. Everywhere you turn for advice, those giving it have an economic interest in your decision—they want you seeing it their way.

Is red meat healthy for you or not? Poultry producers will tell you one thing and cattle ranchers will tell you something else. Is global warming a real danger? You will get different opinions from scientists in industry and from those in academia. Governmental assessments of shoreline changes and beach erosion are cherry-picked on the basis economic interests.

Are dietary approaches to disease treatment effective or not? It may depend on whom you ask: the pharmaceutical industry or whole food producers and the nutritional supplement suppliers.

Whether it is the FDA or the American Medical Association, whether it is an elected official or a syndicated newspaper columnist, whether it is a religious leader or a scientist—all are suspect.

All have been infiltrated by influences that contaminate their objectivity; all overstate their expected accomplishments and downplay their underperformance; all hide their failures or blame someone else when those failures are exposed.

Telling the truth as we know the truth, being transparent, taking responsibility, admitting failure—that is the kind of leadership we need today.

Unfortunately, it is the kind of leadership we would never elect or tolerate for long.

In the late summer of 2008, as the financial house of cards known as the American economic system was beginning to fall apart, the American people wanted someone to blame. The fault belonged to bankers, to lenders, to easy credit, to consumers, to investors, to politicians, to the Federal Reserve, to conspirators, to the rich for having too much, to the poor for wanting too much.

Nobody was willing to say, “This is my fault.” And the truth is that the people responsible were the American public, you and me.

If our leaders were to tell the American people that, we would run them out of town. Our politicians and leaders will only do what we the people allow them to do, and if we don’t want to hear the truth, they won’t tell us the truth. And whose fault is that?

One hundred years earlier, in 1908, *The Times* newspaper of London asked a number of authors to write on the topic: “What’s wrong with the world?” G.K. Chesterton provided the shortest answer. He simply wrote: “Dear Sirs, I am. Sincerely yours, G.K. Chesterton.”

If we want better leadership, we need to be better people, more mature people, more responsible people, more imaginative people. It is up to you and to me. If you and I don’t do it, who will?

The Apostle Paul in his letter to the Philippians also addresses an issue of leadership. There were many disputes and factions, differing philosophies and practices of what faith was supposed to be like. It was confusing to this young fellowship of Christians. What were they to believe, what were they to do, who were they to follow?

Earlier in his letter, Paul instructed them to have the mind of Christ, to model their lives on Christ’s humility and his self-giving on behalf of others and his repudiation of success.

But at this point in his writing, Paul directs the Philippian community to his own example and to the example of others whom the community knows personally.

They are not being directed to a perfect model, to a hero isolated from them, beyond their attainment. When we think of Paul, we always associate “apostle” with his name as though he were some special being different from us. The Philippians knew Paul—they knew his good points and bad, his failures and successes. They knew he wasn’t perfect—they had lived with him!

Paul pointed to himself and his life: “Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us.” Paul was taking responsibility for leadership; he didn’t put that off onto others. Paul could say to the Christians in Philippi, “Stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.” Paul did not say, “You have to be perfect.” He did not say, “You have to do it my way.”

No, no. Paul said, “You’ve seen me, you know me. You know my manner of life and the consistency between my words and actions. I am not perfect, as you well know, but I tell the truth as I understand it, and I am responsible for how I live. And you can be responsible for the way you live as well.”

It is a radical kind of leadership and a powerful way to lead. Such leadership need not coerce or bully; it need not demand compliance or demonize those with differing views. It need not hide from its own failures or shirk its responsibilities. It holds true to the struggle of living in community, engaging the messiness of life with your neighbor, with your friend, and maybe even with someone you don’t like—and learn from the way in which they struggle to live the faith.

It is surprising from whom you can learn and what you can learn.

One day I came across these words:

It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives

valiantly; who errs and comes short again and again, because there is not effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, and spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement; and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory or defeat.

Wow! I was impressed! They are from a speech that President Theodore Roosevelt delivered in 1910 in France.

Do you know where I found those words? They were on the back of a T-shirt that a teenager was wearing! They were printed on the back of his T-shirt! I asked the kid, “Do you mind standing still for about 5 minutes while I write that down?”

I asked, “Did your dad give that t-shirt to you?” “Oh, no,” he said, “I picked it out myself.”

Kids these days. Only into videos and violence. What is the world coming to?

The message on the back of this kid’s T-shirt was about leadership.

Leadership is about those who engage the struggle. It is not about winners and losers. It is about those who plunge into the problems; it is not about those who sit back in safety and comfort to second-guess and pontificate.

Leadership is about us right here and right now; it is not about the next called pastor of this church and what he or she may do. It is about you and me being the church. It is not waiting to hire the next great hero to come in and save us.

Do you believe that this congregation should engage in a particular type of mission? Don’t wait for the mission committee to do it. Do you believe we should have greater transparency in financial matters in the church? Don’t wait for the finance committee.

I'm telling you something you already know and that you have practiced before. This is nothing new to you!

You saw a need to provide educational foundations for all children in this community, so you provided the preschool. You have reached out to the least in the downtown area of Durham to address their most basic needs. You have invested in housing and transportation and food and employment. You have bridged racial and ethnic divides. You the people of First Presbyterian Church know all about leading in this fashion. It is in your DNA!

We need to continue this for the sake of our own children, for all children, because they are watching us and will become just like us.

Paul said to the Philippians, "Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me. I put myself on the line in following Jesus Christ. You do so too, and stand firm."