

Losing Sight of the Leader
July 31, 2016
Wauwatosa Avenue United Methodist Church

A lady was stuck in a snowstorm when she remembered her dad's advice: "If you ever get stuck in a snowstorm, wait until a snowplow drives by and then follow it." Eventually she saw a snowplow so she followed it along in her car. After 30 minutes, the snowplow driver stopped, got out, and walked up to the woman's car asking, "Lady, why are you following me?" She explained what her father had told her and the driver said, "Well I'm done with the Walmart parking lot now. Do you want to follow me to Best Buy?"

Follow the Leader was a popular game when I was growing up. It was made even more famous with the Disney movie version of *Peter Pan*. There were other leader games that were popular, as well. For instance, the game Simon Says requires close following of the directions of the leader. There were always those leaders who were good at getting us "out" by calling instructions quickly, then leaving out those all-important words, "Simon says." I always got caught on that. I guess I don't always do a good job of following the leader!

The scriptures are full of stories of God calling people to follow. God called Abram and Sarai when they were living in Ur – present-day Iran. They were called to leave family and everything behind to follow God to a land of promise. Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt, but he was following pillars of cloud and

fire, which God provided. Jesus called the disciples to follow him, which meant travelling with him as his students. They learned a new way to live and a way of being in relationship with the One God who was both “out there” and in relationship with us “up close and personal.”

In today’s reading from the Hebrew Scriptures, Hosea provides us with a reflection by a loving parent whose child has gone astray. For those who have had children who have made bad choices, you can probably particularly identify with this reading. God is the parent here and Israel is the child, though Israel is also referred to as Ephraim. Ephraim was one of Joseph’s (as in *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*) sons and the original leader of one of the twelve tribes of Israel. Listen again to these words:

I fell in love with Israel when he was still a child; and I have called him My son ever since Egypt. Thus were they called, but they went their own way; they sacrifice to Baalim and offer to carved images. I have pampered Ephraim, taking them in My arms; but they have ignored my healing care. I drew them with human ties, with cords of love; but I seemed to them as one who imposed a yoke on their jaws, though I was offering them food... How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How surrender you, O Israel?

This is truly a lament on God’s part. You can almost hear and feel God weeping in this oracle. God has been the one who loved them from the beginning, but they have gone to follow another and it could be to their ruin.

God's gift of freewill has given us untold options. We accept love at times and other times we reject it. We believe all kinds of lies about it. Those lies often turn us away from the ones who love us the most. It brings to mind Johnny Lee's classic song, "Lookin' for Love in All the Wrong Places."

Hosea is really the prophet of love. This entire book is a lived parable about the love of God for God's people. If you haven't read it lately, I commend it to you. I will warn you, it is an odd one. Right away in the first chapter, God orders Hosea to marry a prostitute. That prostitute symbolizes Israel. It symbolizes us, as well, when we take our eyes off the leader.

As we read, it seems so obvious to us where the Chosen Ones always seem to go wrong. Isn't that the way life is? We can see where everyone else has messed things up, but we go merrily along our own way just sure that we have it all together. We *know* things. We see what we want and we go after it. We are a tenacious people. What's wrong with that? Indeed, what *is* wrong with that? Perhaps nothing. The Israelites were tenacious in following Moses and the pillars of cloud and fire by day and by night. But, every time the going got tough they blamed Moses and God and wanted to turn back. They somehow forgot the oppression and terrible living conditions of Egypt and Pharaoh, then accused Moses and God of bringing them into the desert only to let them perish. They formed the very first "Back to Egypt" committee. Nearly every church has one. This is the group of people who remember the "good old days" with great fondness and want to return. Of course, they've forgotten the parts of the past that were not so good and they forget that their parents were

part of the “Back to Egypt” committee of that day, harkening back to an even more “golden era.” They forget that times have changed and doing what we used to do will not bring about the desired change. In fact, one of the more humorous definitions of insanity is to do the same thing over and over again expecting different outcomes. I haven’t found the Back to Egypt committee here at Tosa Avenue yet, but I bet we have one!

In our modern times, we have been taught that more is better. “The one who dies with the most toys wins.” There is a new and improved version of almost any product available on the market. If you use the right toothpaste, hair conditioner, and cologne you are sure to get the guy or gal of your dreams. I have a car, but once every year or two I’d like to be able to go off road, so, even though it is just me, I need to get another vehicle. I like to go to Chicago, but parking is so difficult, maybe I should get a Smart Car for the eight or so times I go to Chicago. You know, even I could park one of those on a postage stamp. All of a sudden I, just one person, could end up with three cars.

“What can I do? My barn isn’t big enough for this harvest.” Then he said, “Here’s what I’ll do: I’ll tear down my barns and build bigger ones. Then I’ll gather in all my grain and goods, and I’ll say to myself, ‘Self, you’ve done well! You’ve got it made and can now retire. Take it easy and have the time of your life!’”

You know what happened next. He didn’t get the opportunity to enjoy all for which he had worked. We’ve seen that before. People work hard to retire. They don’t enjoy the moment because

all their attention is on the future. Then, when the future arrives and retirement is possible, every known inherited family pathology comes to the surface and a few new ones, too. I'm not saying that we should not plan for the future. Of course, we should. I'm just saying that God has given us everything we have. Look around. It's beautiful. It's wonderful. But we have to take the time to enjoy it – to live into it.

In Eugene Peterson's version of the Sermon of the Mount, Jesus says, "If you decide for God, living a life of God-worship, it follows that you don't fuss about what's on the table at mealtimes or whether the clothes in your closet are in fashion. There is far more to your life than the food you put in your stomach, more to your outer appearance than the clothes you hang on your body. Look at the first, free and unfettered, not tied down to a job description, careless in the care of God. And you count far more to Him than birds."

I have to admit, I find this teaching a little difficult. By the sheer luck of where I was born and the family into which I was born, I've had a pretty charmed life. I've never been hungry. I've always had a roof over my head. I've mostly been relatively safe, though it becomes harder and harder to define safety in our world.

The problem for the rich farmer was not what he had and his desire to plan for the future. He went wrong when he did it all for himself and did not plan for anyone else to succeed.

I think our stewardship campaign for the fall will be based on Wesley's rules for money. "Earn all you can, so you can save all

you can, so you can give all you can.” We Americans are pretty good at the first one, getting better at the second one, but struggling some with that “give all you can.” As I have read through old issues of *The Tower*, I see that Tosa Avenue is better than many churches with the giving of our resources. I also see that a lot of the giving and much of the work tends to be by the same people over and over. Our bishop, Hee-Soo Jung, speaks of activating the “pew potatoes.” It is a take-off on “couch potatoes.” They are the people who come to Sunday morning worship and do nothing beyond that for the church or community. I realize that people are in many places on their spiritual journey. Some are new to it and worship is a new entry place. Others have been here for years and were once more active, but now cannot do all they once could. I get that. There comes a time to hand over the reins of leadership to the next generations. However, there is no retirement from your Christian witness. When we became members, we vowed to support the church with our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness.

One of the beauties of coming together as church and being active as Christian community is that it helps us keep things in perspective. We do not have to agree on everything or even believe exactly the same things. We do not all have to do the same work in the church. After all, we’ve all been given different gifts. The church helps us recognize where there is need in the world. By coming together in small groups based on our passions and interests, it is not just us trying to take on ministry “Lone Ranger” style.

We are called to keep our eyes on our leader, Jesus. Hosea assures us that, no matter what, we are loved. At the same time, it is God's desire that we not lose our way, but that we "Follow the leader, the leader, the leader. We follow the leader, wherever he may go."