

Holy Heroes: Challenge to Change
Isaiah 1:1, 10-20; Luke 6:17-26
July 15, 2007

Max Lucado tells the story of a man who had been a closet slob most of his life. He just couldn't comprehend the logic of neatness. Why make up a bed if you're going to sleep in it again tonight? Why put the lid on the toothpaste tube if you're going to take it off again in the morning? The man admitted to being compulsive about being messy.

Then he got married. His wife was patient. She said she didn't mind his habits ... if he didn't mind sleeping on the couch. Since he did mind, he began to change. He enrolled in a 12-step program for slobs. A physical therapist helped him rediscover the muscles used for hanging up shirts and placing toilet paper on the holder. His nose was reintroduced to the smell of Pine Sol. By the time his in-laws arrived for a visit, he was a new man.

Then came the moment of truth. His wife went out of town for a week. At first he reverted to his former self. He figured he could be a slob for six days and clean on the seventh. But something strange happened. He could no longer relax with dirty dishes in the sink or towels flung around the bathroom or clothes on the floor or sheets piled up like a mountain on the bed.

What happened? He had been exposed to a higher standard of living. That's what Jesus does.¹

I share this story not to weigh in on any domestic disputes at your home or mine! What's important is the moral Max draws from the story: Jesus exposes us to a higher standard of living. It is the role of godly leaders to expose others to a higher standard of living. This doesn't necessarily mean a more costly standard of living, but a higher moral road and oftentimes new ways of doing things. In short, leaders are called to be agents of change.

Leaders take their colleagues on voyages of discovery. They broaden the corporate perspective in order to see fresh possibilities. With pioneering spirits, they venture into territory not yet explored. Leaders take risks because they know that doing things the same way we've always done them won't get success today. We live in a different world than we did 50 years ago in the heyday of the church culture. We live in a different world than we did one year ago, given new technology that is on the market each and every day and the many volatile situations brewing around the globe. One of the roles of leaders is to disturb the status quo, to change the business as usual environment. We are called to instill a sense of adventure in others

and to look outside for new and fresh ideas. We are to create a culture characterized by challenge, energy, excitement, inspiration, and innovation.

Before we embark upon change, it is important to know our nonnegotiables. We need to clarify our values and goals. These provide the foundation for our actions and keep us grounded in integrity. We are not called to willy-nilly buy into any new fad or strategy or idea that comes our way. We need to know our beliefs and values in order to assess which approaches and ideas are a fit for us.

As Christian leaders in our families, congregation, community, and workplaces, we have a core set of values and beliefs given to us in the Bible and the tradition of the church. How those values are expressed and interpreted may differ, but nevertheless, they provide a common foundation for our actions.

The role of prophetic leaders is to state the present reality and to declare how the people have strayed from the intentions of God. This morning we hear from Isaiah his judgment on the people Israel for turning their backs on God. They go through the motions of offering the required sacrifices, but otherwise the actions of their lives are not in accord with the commandments of God. They can't just rest on their laurels doing what is comfortable, familiar, and easy. Isaiah reminds them that the life of faith is an active strategy. It involves doing good, seeking justice, rescuing the oppressed, defending the powerless, advocating for the vulnerable. Isaiah is upsetting the comfortable status quo and arousing them to new challenges which are more faithful to the will of God.

Prophets usually aren't popular because their challenges are unsettling. However our world needs leaders who are bold enough to call us to account and hold us to common standards of morality and decency. The complexities of life today and our global reality can easily catch us up in a chaotic cycle that throws us off balance. We need prophets to remind us of our core values and to prod us to return to those values, acting on them in creative, innovative ways that meet the changing needs of our world.

In her book, *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, Diana Butler Bass reminds us of the values upon which our nation was founded. "Aboard the ship that had carried Massachusetts Bay colonists to the New World, before even setting foot on land, Puritan governor John Winthrop preached a sermon, 'A Model of Christian Charity,' that laid out a religious vision for the settlers. God had called New England to be a model Christian society, he said, one shaped by justice, compassion, and charity. The test of American faithfulness would not be purity of doctrine; rather, God—and the world—would judge the colonists on the basis of how they cared for one

another. 'There are two rules whereby we are to walk one towards another,' stated Winthrop, 'Justice and Mercy.'

"Winthrop reminded the settlers that, in the early church, believers shared everything in common, remitted debt, freed the oppressed, gave bread to the hungry, and clothed the naked. This, he claimed, was the way of justice as evidenced by love. And he equally insisted that if the settlers failed, God would withhold blessing their land. 'Now the only way to avoid this shipwreck and to provide for our posterity,' he advised, 'is to follow the counsel of Micah, to do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God.' Justice would be the church's primary witness to the world: 'For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us.'"²

Indeed nearly four centuries later, the eyes of all people are still upon the United States of America. We play a leading role in most arenas of our global world. And yet, are we abiding by those two rules that Winthrop lifted up as so crucial to our life together: justice and mercy?

Who are the widows, orphans, and strangers among us today, those whom the prophets, Jesus, and God call us to care for? They take the form of single women, many living in great poverty, who have been abandoned by husbands and boyfriends and are raising children by themselves. Thousands of children have been orphaned by the unrelenting ravages of HIV/AIDS as well as by tribal warfare in Africa, ethnic cleansing in the Balkans, and wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The strangers among us are the migrant workers who pick our food and the illegal immigrants who clean our hotels and mow our lawns. They are persons with "Arab sounding names" or Sikhs from India who, because of their religion wear turbans or head wraps that now arouse suspicion and fear.³

Writing in the August 2005 issue of *Harper's Magazine*, Bill McKibben says, "America is simultaneously the most professedly Christian of the developed nations and the least Christian in its behavior."⁴ He notes that over 85 percent of all Americans identify themselves as Christians, and yet this country leads all developed nations in the murder rate, the use of capital punishment, the number of persons incarcerated, the percentage of marriages ending in divorce, the rate of teen pregnancy, and the number of children living in poverty.⁵

The biblical prophets would declare that this state is unacceptable and out of alignment with the values of God. In his beatitudes, Jesus illuminates God's favor for the poor, the hungry, those who weep, and those who are hated. He speaks to real socioeconomic conditions, not to spiritual conditions or attitudes. Jesus declares God's partisan commitment to the

poor and oppressed. Jesus' teachings weren't well received in his time, for they overturned conventional expectations. They disrupted the status quo. They anticipated a reversal of fortunes in God's reign of justice.

Jesus' declarations are not well received today, for they challenge our comfort zones. They call us out of our complacency into action, not for ourselves, but on behalf of others. They call us to share our abundance with those who have nothing. Jesus challenges us to take the higher road so that all might have the opportunity of a moral and just standard of living.

Grounded in the godly values of justice and mercy, Christian leaders are called to be agents of change. Change might begin with our own lifestyles, simplifying where we are able and not falling victim to our consumer culture. We can raise our voices for change in society, writing letters and making phone calls to legislators. We can offer micro-loans to entrepreneurs in poor nations who are pulling themselves out of poverty. We can lend our energies to the church and other organizations working for change in the world. We might find an issue about which we are passionate and become an advocate for that issue. The goal is creating change that insures quality of life for all God's people.

Tillie Olsen wrote a story about a poverty-stricken mother. She works at an ironing board while anguishing over a note from the school asking her to come in and discuss her daughter, who "needs help."

The mother muses, "She was a child seldom smiled at. Her father left me before she was a year old....She was dark and thin and foreign-looking in a world where the prestige went to blondness and curly hair and dimples; she was slow where glibness was prized. She was a child of anxious, not proud, love. We were poor and could not afford the soil of easy growth. I was a young mother; I was a distracted mother...My wisdom came too late. She has much to her and probably little will come of it. She is a child of her age, of depression, of war, of fear.

"Let her be. So all that is in her will not bloom – but in how many does it? There is still enough left to live by. Only help her to know – help make it so there is cause for her to know – that she is more than this dress on the ironing board, helpless before the iron."⁶

"Help her to know that she is more than this dress on the ironing board, helpless before the iron." Hear that mother's cry, raging and prayer – "a cry for mercy, a raging for justice, and a prayer to the only one who can prevent the hot irons of evil from pressing down all hope and faith."⁷

May we be bold to use our voices, our vote, our power, our abundance to enable all that is in that little girl to bloom. May we seize the

opportunities given us to make a difference, to create change, and to raise the quality of living for “the least of these.”

¹ Max Lucado, *In the Grip of Grace* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1996), 116-117.

² Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church is Transforming the Faith* (New York: HarperSan Francisco, 2006), p. 162.

³ Marvin A. McMickle, *Where Have All the Prophets Gone?* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2006), p. 6.

⁴ Bill McKibben, "The Christian Paradox: How a Faithful Nation Gets Jesus Wrong," *Harper's Magazine* (August 2005), p. 37.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁶ Tillie Olson, "I Stand Here Ironing," *Tell Me a Riddle* (New York: Dell Books, 1971), pp. 20-21.

⁷ Thomas G. Long, "Praying for the Wrath of God," *Preaching Through the Apocalypse*, ed. Cornish R. Rogers and Joseph R. Jeter, Jr. (St. Louis, Mo.: Chalice Press, 1992), pp. 138-139.

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