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THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF PREACHING:
The influence of African American preaching and teaching on congregational culture

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Abstract

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Every church has a set of unspoken beliefs and values that are displayed in how they behave. This behavior is known as its culture. The culture of a congregation can be supportive and edifying and it can be divisive and toxic. For over two centuries Black pastors have been held as the nuclei of Black churches and the chief custodians of their cultures. The cultural attitudes over which the pastor is custodian can be negative and stunt the growth and development of the congregation. Churches cannot survive stunted growth for long so the negative pieces of the culture must change. Since the Black pastor is the core of the church having a highly respected position, they can facilitate the excision of the diseased portion of the culture through their use of sacred rhetoric, in particular, preaching and teaching. Preaching and teaching which intentionally focuses on strengthening the helpful and positive facets of the culture while eliminating those problematic portions of the same.

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A Final Project submitted to the Faculty of the
Candler School of Theology
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Ministry
2021

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Part I - Articulation of the Problem

It is a well-established fact that all organizations have an indigenous culture. The constructs of these cultures are often misunderstood, misinterpreted, and miscommunicated. The institution we know of as the church is no exception to this construct. If one is honest, the institution of the church often specializes in creating unique cultures that are frequently misconstrued by both those inside the institution and those outside the institution.

The foundation of this project is based in the question, “How does African American preaching and teaching (i.e., hermeneutics) influence congregational culture?” Every church I have pastored has several members who are visionaries with no willingness to work. This is a trend among many congregants; they will visit another church or see another church’s worship on video, and they will come into my office and say, “pastor we should do...” Other times they will have an idea for the betterment of the church, and they will bring it to me and use the same phrase. I then ask them to put the idea on paper and do the background research and bring that information back to me to begin implementing this new idea. The overwhelming majority would reply to me, “well pastor, I don’t have time, that is why I am bringing it to you.” In my current pastorate, this happens more often than it ever happened previously. This became particularly frustrating because it seemed as though some people just assume the pastor will do it, give it to him.

Admittedly, I had begun to grow frustrated with situations such as this because I was getting to the point of being overworked. Instead of becoming embittered or more frustrated I decided there had to be a reason for this frequent occurrence, hence the birth of this project. This project is designed to answer three questions:

1. How do individual personalities and behaviors influence the congregational culture of this local church and conversely, how does congregational culture shape individuals at St. James Church?
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2. To what extent do preaching and teaching govern how congregants relate to local church culture and conversely, how the congregational culture shapes the individual?
3. What can be done to cause change to take place in the mindset of the people?

I believe the answer is – preaching and teaching. That is, preaching and teaching from texts that show how everyone, not just the pastor, has a role in developing ideas that will improve the local church. The central text which I chose to focus was Exodus 18:

3 The next day Moses sat as judge for the people, while the people stood around him from morning until evening. 14 When Moses' father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, "What is this that you are doing for the people? Why do you sit alone, while all the people stand around you from morning until evening?" 15 Moses said to his father-in-law, "Because the people come to me to inquire of God. 16 When they have a dispute, they come to me and I decide between one person and another, and I make known to them the statutes and instructions of God." 17 Moses' father-in-law said to him, "What you are doing is not good. 18 You will surely wear yourself out, both you and these people with you. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. 19 Now listen to me. I will give you counsel, and God be with you! You should represent the people before God, and you should bring their cases before God; 20 teach them the statutes and instructions and make known to them the way they are to go and the things they are to do. 21 You should also look for able men among all the people, men who fear God, are trustworthy, and hate dishonest gain; set such men over them as officers over thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens. 22 Let them sit as judges for the people at all times; let them bring every important case to you but decide every minor case themselves. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you. 23 If you do this, and God so commands you, then you will be able to endure, and all these people will go to their home in peace." (NRSV)

The main themes I gleaned from this text which are applicable to this project are:

1. Pastors are not the only leaders in the congregation.
2. Pastors who try to micromanage every detail can endanger his or her health and the health of the congregation.
3. Leadership that is well trained can and should be trusted.

This text is foundational because it speaks to the issue of what can be done to help pastors who feel overworked but insist on continuing to do so out of an idolatrous sense of duty to the congregation. This study will examine the genesis of the local church's current culture and present a template for training that aids in transforming the culture.

Part II – Understanding the Local Culture

A. *How Congregational Cultures Emerge*

In discussing transforming the culture of the church one must first define culture as it refers to congregations. In his book, *Look Before You Lead*, Aubrey Malphurs defines congregational culture as, “the unique expression of the interaction of the church’s shared beliefs and its values, which explain its behavior in general and display its unique identity in particular.” (Malphurs, 2013, p.20) Every church has a set of beliefs and values which are unique to its locality. These concepts always have an origin. No habit, set of behaviors, or values just appears out of the ether. The challenge of the field of ethnography is using the tool of exploration of symbols, stories, and writings to gather a better understanding of how cultural customs become norms.

In the 1950s and 1960s sociologists Melville Herskovits and E. Franklin Frazier debated the origins of African American cultural constructs relative to the church. In his book, *The Myth of the Negro Past*, Herskovits claimed some native African cultural forms survived attempts to be removed from the memory of the slaves and these forms served to distinguish African American culture from that of Europeans. Frazier’s claim is slavery destroyed most of all vestiges of African culture; one of those vestiges was the family unit as defined in African culture. Frazier surmised a new culture had to be reorganized. This reorganization was built chiefly around the black church along with other social institutions (Gilbert, 33-34). In either case, one thing is certain religion and religious institutions became the core of the community for African Americans subsequent to the Civil War.

Since the church becomes the center of the community, the black pastor becomes one of the most highly regarded leaders in the community. In his book, *Leadership in the Black Church*, Michael Evans makes the following point:

“Historically, the primary role model and person of prominence in the African American community was, for more than one hundred years, the pastor. He was the person looked upon by the community as the advocate for the rights of the people in his congregation. It was widely known that the Black pastor, after the abolition of slavery, was one of the few literate people in the community. Due to his value in the sight of the people as the chief spokesperson and spiritual guide of the community, people were encouraged to attend to the basic welfare of the pastor and his family.” (Evans, 2018, Kindle position 519)

Evans points to some key reasons why the pastor becomes one of key figures in the community. Pastors were usually literate and because they were literate, they were viewed as being intelligent enough to be “advocates” for the members of their congregations. Because of the pastor’s status in the community, he was treated with respect which bordered on reverence. For these reasons, at the center of the African American church and community stood the pastor (Evans, 2018, Kindle location 484). One distinction needs to be made at this point. The pastor’s *position* is highly revered, not necessarily the person in the seat. In the Evans words, “Traditionally, the Black Church has granted a significant amount of autonomy to those who occupy its pulpits. Consequently, the pastor has been ascribed a level of reverence and devotion that for some has been characterized as “idolatry” on the part of those who make up his local church congregation, and for no other reason than that he is the pastor.” (Evans, 2018, Kindle Position, 569)

In my local congregation this cultural construct still pervades well into the twenty-first century. It is concentrated among congregants who are seventy and above. In conversations and interviews with members of this local congregation I have found they have the utmost respect for the office of pastor. When I was invited to a television watch party at the home of one of my officers, her mother, also a member of this congregation, overheard her planning the menu and

when she heard the mention of sliced ham, sliced turkey, and sliced chicken to make sandwiches her response was, “the pastor is coming you can’t feed him that. You need to do something else.” The implication was the pastor is no ordinary person, he must be given the best. In a scene in the 1997 movie *Soul Food*, the matriarch of family invites the pastor to their Sunday family dinner. He is given first choice of all the food and is even invited to bless the food. Her daughters see the pastor as more amorous of the matriarch than reverent and rightly so based on his flirtations towards the matriarch. The family matriarch, affectionately called “Mother,” may see this as well, but she ignores it, because he is the pastor and she respects his power and position. (Soul Food, 1997)

B. St. James AME Church and the Genesis of Contemporary Congregational Culture

When I first arrived at St. James in March 2016, I quickly realized the officers of the church and most of the lay leadership were extremely respectful almost to the point of being obsequious to pastoral leadership. As time has passed, I have realized that parishioners’ deferential behavior translates to the inability to initiate any project or to contact a potential partner in ministry without my pastor approval. Pastoral approval is pivotal to AME Church administration and leadership as stated in the Discipline, the pastor, “...shall be the official head of all boards and auxiliaries and no change in their composition shall be considered legal without his or her consent and cooperation (Belin, 2017, pg. 85).” Moreover, nothing can change on any board or organization without pastoral approval. However, this has been taken to an extreme with congregants because many people feel as though they are not able to think through an idea before it is presented to the pastor. This is a problem because the people will bring an idea to me and expect me to execute the idea through planning, contacting others and implementation. Rather than expecting guidance, they expect me to take and to develop their ideas –alongside all of my other responsibilities.

This cultural behavior has two points of origin. The first point of origin comes from the way many of the older congregants were socialized, religiously. As I conversed with several members of the church whose parents (usually church mothers) are in their late seventies and early eighties, I found they were taught that a person must always respect the pastor. Many are even chastised when they say something the church mother believes to be disrespectful. (One good example of this is when I was invited to a movie night at the home of my administrative assistant. She told her mother the menu and then told her I was coming. Her mother's response was, "you can't serve him sandwiches and chips...he's the pastor." (Martin, Damita. 2020 Interview by author. Memphis. December 21, 2020) They learned this from their mothers and fathers. This was ingrained in them by a generation who believed,

"The black preacher, especially in the South, is king in a private kingdom. Whether learned or ignorant, he is both oracle and soothsayer, showman and pontiff, father image to all and husband-by-proxy to the unattached women in the church and others whose mates are either inadequate or missing. More than a priest, he is less only than God." (Farmer, 1985, pg. 33).

The second point is best summarized by Michael Evans. He states:

"An often-misunderstood defense mechanism is clergy leaders who feel the need to demonstrate they are more knowledgeable on most subjects than others. The result of this tendency is to overcompensate in those areas in which the person is less knowledgeable and leads to mismanagement, improper counseling practices, and other inefficiencies." (Evans, 2018, Kindle Edition Location 550.)

The pastor before my predecessor could best be described like this. He was defined by congregants that I interviewed as a micro-manager who did not listen to those who did not agree with him. He also was very insecure about people who appeared to be more knowledgeable than he in certain areas. He had to be the originator of every new thought and every new program. Because of this, the congregation did not work to develop their own original thoughts. He overcompensated for the congregation which prevented them from taking initiative and exercising their creative muscles.

When he was appointed to another congregation, pastors who followed him, of which I was one, were faced with a congregation that was petrified about presenting independent thoughts, ideas, or even critiquing the pastor.

C. Social Forces that Shape Congregational Culture

In conversing with several focus groups from the following age demographics; 20 – 39, 40 – 59, 60 – 79 and 80 and over one of the questions raised was: Who is the chief shaper of the church's culture? In every group the answer was almost identical...the pastor AND the people. One member of the 60 – 79 demographic gave a very pointed answer, saying, "the pastor defines the culture, but lay leaders are supposed to guard the culture." (Martin, Focus Group Interview). This statement supplied me with a vivid picture of how the culture of the church endures. In the African American church context, there has been "...granted a significant amount of autonomy to those who occupy its pulpits." (Evans, 2018, Kindle Edition Location 569).

African American churches have historically granted latitude to the pastor that stretches situationally. With that latitude comes a sense of responsibility. Although the pastor defines the culture, the pastor is also called to take care to delve into the core beliefs of the congregation (Malphurs, 2013, pg. 21). Understanding the church's core beliefs shows the pastor the direction in which the church can move with little to no resistance. This is important because when a pastor is simply a dictator the people end up disenfranchised and in turn, they can grow embittered. (Evans, 2018, Kindle Edition Location, position 547). If the congregation becomes bitter, its days are numbered unless the pastor intentionally makes changes which will enfranchise the people and help them understand they are a part of the process of determining how life in the church proceeds.

The church's core beliefs are not only the theology and doctrine espoused by the church, but the core beliefs also include fundamental aspects of the life of the church including how the

congregation views chronology (are they focused in their past, their present, or their future?), how they view human nature and how they communicate. (Malphurs, 2013, pg. 22) These beliefs are displayed as values. Leonora Tisdale speaks of values in terms of what reflects a person's interests and preferences in the world; collective or singular (Tisdale, 1997, pg. 77). She takes it even further by dividing it into several categories to explain how values are oriented and then manifested. Tisdale says the following about these orientations:

- 1) Human nature orientation speaks to the perception of human beings as being basically good or basically evil.
- 2) Nature/Supernature orientation speaks to the perception of the placement of humanity in relationship to nature, meaning is humanity superior, equal to, or subject to it.
- 3) Time orientation speaks to whether people are focused on past events, present events, or future events.
- 4) Activity orientation speaks to whether the people value actions and activities that allows us to measure accomplishments or do they value themselves as the standard by which they measure accomplishments.
- 5) Relational orientation which measures how they interact with people; do we interrelate individually (individual goals taking precedence over the group), collaterally (the welfare of the laterally extended group is emphasized), or lineally (where the groups continuity and orderly succession over time becomes paramount) (Tisdale, 1997, pp. 78-79).

The orientation of the values will govern the shape of the church's culture. Regarding the orientations of St. James, my observations indicate the following about the congregation.

- 1) This local congregation is firm in its belief that people are basically good (Human Nature Orientation).
 - 2) This local congregation sees itself not as being superior to nature but as a group we are to be in harmony with nature (Nature/Supernature Orientation).
 - 3) This congregation has one foot fixed in the past and the other fixed firmly in the future. There is a great concern for the future of the church given the direction of the African Methodist Episcopal denomination over last twenty-five years. The focus on the past come from a nearly cataclysmic split in the congregation surrounding a loan taken out by the pastor. (Time orientation)
 - 4) The local congregation is very much focused more on actions than being as a barometer of accomplishments. (Activity orientation)
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- 5) The congregation is interested in group continuity and in making sure the posterity of the church is solidified. (Relational orientation)

Understanding these values/orientations clarifies for me what drives the culture of the church.

This congregation is a benevolent society of men and women who believes in the essential goodness of humanity. The congregation see themselves as in harmony with nature not rising above it. There are circumstances which have caused this congregation to focus on the past alongside having a fear of what may happen to the church in the future. They are much more focused on activities, especially those that have a focus on the community. The congregational culture is driven by these beliefs and values.

III. Preaching, Teaching, and African American Congregational Cultures

In his book, *Journey & Promise of African American Preaching* homiletician Kenyatta Gilbert makes the following assertion regarding one of the key responsibilities of the African American pastor. “The preacher’s capacity, as spiritual guide, to gather up the needs and hopes of an awaiting congregation and to interpret them in light of the gospel is essential to the preacher’s work.” (Gilbert, 2011, pg. 131). As pastor, I am a guardian of the culture as well as the teaching and preaching which emanates from the sacred desk. It is my responsibility to know congregational hopes alongside its needs and to couch those hopes and needs in the existential truth of the gospel. Preaching and teaching are elemental to addressing every aspect of life in the African American Church, including its culture.

Teaching and preaching that intends to shape the culture must be intentional. There can be nothing haphazard about what is presented to God’s people. Samuel Proctor reminded all preachers of this when he said “It is the most superficial exercise to prepare one message and aim it at any and all congregations. It defies the very nature of honest communication. The gospel is the same, but the listeners are different and deserve a message for them right where

they are.” (Proctor, 1994, Kindle Edition Locations 283-284) This is why the preacher/teacher must understand the beliefs and values of the congregation as well understanding his or her own context and create a sermons and lessons that pointedly support the positive aspects of the culture and at the same time challenge the aspects of the culture which are divisive or damaging. An essential part of the planning process is to choose which aspects of culture need to be addressed first. How can one discern this? Observation of behavior and conversations with members of the congregation around what they find to be important. That which people value is often the topic of their conversation consciously and unconsciously.

When I first arrived at St. James, I met with two of the chief financial officers of the church, Dr. Jodie Higgs and Josalyn Tresvant. A large part of the conversation revolved around financial transparency. In 1997 the loan taken out by a previous pastor gave birth to a culture of distrust. The two officers made virtually the same statement, “We are still paying for his mistake and the people are still nervous around any discussions revolving spending money.” (Jodie Higgs and Josalyn Tresvant. 2016. Interview by author. Memphis. March 23, 2016)

The conversation continued with the two ladies recounting the fact they were both in college when the restructuring of the churches finance department was taking place. They returned as new officers after the debacle. Both became the chief financial officers in the church at the ages of twenty-two and twenty-four, respectively. Having been absent from the fiduciary fracas and being daughters of the church, as well as coming from well-respected families in the congregation, they continue to make acceptable, trustworthy candidates. Even though they were and still are trusted, the spectral memory of this traumatic era in the history of the church still looms large. This one irresponsible act perpetrated over twenty years ago made many congregants hypersensitive about finances.

When in conversation with the four demographic groups three of them displayed a sensitivity to the financial standing of the church. Some because, as members of the finance team, they are anxious about the way financial reports are scrutinized. The motives of those who scrutinize the reports are difficult to ascertain since they do not discuss their concerns publicly. Because of this and the debacle, there is a noticeable amount of anxiety around the financial reports.

The one demographic who seems to not be as sensitive about the spending in the church are those who are over the age of eighty. This age group is historically the financial backbone of the church and they also tend to not be overly sensitive about the finances of the church. This is because they do not see themselves as giving to the church, instead they see themselves as giving to God with the church as the conduit. They do care where the money goes. Yet most will tell you they are giving to God and if the church misuses it, God will hold them accountable. Their belief is God will deal with those who misuse and abuse not only finances but anything and anyone attached to the church.

A. Views of Pastoral Leadership and Styles

The view of former pastoral leadership also contributes to the lack of trust between members and leadership and a culture of anxiety. The former pastor whom the AME bishops had removed from this congregation's leadership in 2013 helped to create this culture of anxiety. People who worked with him in the administration of the church were anxious to approach him. Even if they had ideas on how to improve the church, they would share them very gingerly or face the pastor's ire. Anxiety still pervades this congregation's culture.

These two aspects of culture are relatively common in churches. They are of particular concern in my local congregation because they have been a source of pain, here.

To go more deeply into the way pastoral leadership contributes to congregational culture, I asked the following question of focus groups: “Which leadership style do you believe is the best for pastoral leadership?” To answer this question, I placed the leadership styles and definitions before the groups:

- a. Autocratic Style - The phrase is most illustrative of “Do as I say.” Generally, they make all the decisions with little input from team members.
- b. Authoritative Style - This phrase is most indicative of “Follow me.” It is the mark of confident leaders who map the way and set expectations while engaging and energizing followers along the way.
- c. Pacesetter Style – “Do as I do!” This style describes a very driven leader who sets the pace as in racing. Pacesetters set the bar high and push their team members to run hard and fast to the finish line.
- d. Democratic Style – They are likely to ask, “What do you think?” They share information with employees about anything that affects their work responsibilities. They also seek employees' opinions before approving a final decision.
- e. Coaching Style – They tend to have a "Consider this" approach. A leader who coaches views people as a reservoir of talent to be developed. The leader who uses a coach approach seeks to unlock people's potential.
- f. Affiliative Style – This style is "People come first." Of all the leadership styles, the affiliative leadership approach pays attention to and supports the emotional needs of team members. The leader strives to open up a pipeline that connects him or her to the team.
- g. Laissez-Faire Style - The laissez-faire leadership style is at the opposite end of the autocratic style. This one involves the least amount of oversight. You could say that the autocratic style leader stands as firm as a rock on issues, while the laissez-faire leader lets people swim with the current.

(Definitions courtesy of DANIELLE DOOLEN May 18, 2020 article in <https://www.careercontessa.com/advice/leadership-styles>)

These leadership styles can fit into one of three categories or types of biblical leaders: prophet, priest, or monarch.

The biblical prophet was one who communicated the message of God to God’s people and would in turn represent the people to God. Prophets were often berated along with being

hated. The leadership styles that generally fit the role of prophet best are authoritative, pacesetter, coaching. The authoritative style fits because of the phrase, “follow me.” Moses for example, was one who said to the people follow me as God gives me direction and you will see freedom. One of the chief responsibilities of the prophet is to speak what God says and carry out the edicts of God. The people do not have an option, if they believe God, they need to follow God’s prophet.

The prophet as pacesetter is indicated by the prophet’s ability to exhibit a “do as I do.” The pace is set by the prophet as leader. Elisha exemplified the pacesetter style when confronting Gehazi after he lied and took Naaman’s money. Elisha was setting the example of the importance of ministry for the sake of building and expanding God’s kingdom. He demonstrated what to do and then expected Gehazi to do it head toward the same goal of excellence in prophetic ministry.

The prophet as coach is indicated by the prophet’s ability to address a group of people in a manner which draws out their potential. Jesus as a prophet chose a group of rag tag individuals whom he knew had in them great potential. He took his disciples everywhere and gave them opportunities to use the gifts inside them. When they did not understand he would correct them and then allow them opportunities to again use their gifts. The most important point Jesus kept making is, this ministry would be theirs when he went back to heaven. Everything he was teaching was meant to be used long after his physical departure. A coach’s job is to help us be our best selves.

The biblical priest was one who ensured the temple, and the things of the temple were properly cared for. They also have the responsibility to represent people to God vis-a-vis leading prayers and preparing sacrifices. The leadership styles which fit the role of priest are

authoritative and affiliative. Priests were authoritative in the sense they are required to set forth a strict set of expectations which are to be carried out by the people. They are also instrumental in pushing people to observe these guidelines to remain in proper ritualistic and spiritual standing with God.

Regarding the affiliative style of leadership, the priest's job is to make sure the people are in proper standing with God. This leadership style is most identified with putting people first. He, theoretically, was meant to put the spiritual welfare of God's people first and open the pathway to God. The priest in many ways is one who helps the people maintain their emotional or spiritual stability. He does this by performing and leading in certain rituals which ceremonially cleanse the people and restore them to righteousness. He is to care for the people and bring them to the place where they are no longer soiled by the sin on their lives.

The leadership styles which fit most biblical monarchs are autocratic, authoritarian, or laissez-faire. Most biblical monarchs were autocrats. Their expectation was the people were going to do as they were told, no questions asked. Autocrats had little regard for the people over whom they ruled and if the people took issue, the punishment was usually severe. Pharaoh in Exodus typified this behavior. He went unmoved by Moses demands because he was not used to being told what to do and he did not ask for much advice.

The authoritative monarch took a slightly less demanding approach. They would strongly admonish their subjects to follow them because they know what needs to be done. David was such a leader. He rarely took advice, and he was exceptionally confident when he went into battle. David was charismatic, charming, and persuasive. He was engaging and could convince people to do what he wanted them to do.

The monarch whose style was laissez-faire did very little to guide the people. They would often just let things happen. They gave little if any direction and were comparatively disinterested. This type of monarch did nothing and let the government run itself. These kinds of leaders also tend to surround themselves with strong people who shield them for their own weakness. Ahab was one such king. He was spineless and ultra-sensitive. Furthermore, his wife the infamous Jezebel, led him around by the nose. His reign was marked and marred by the decisions his wife made. That is the downfall of the leader who has adopted the laissez-faire style of leadership, they take no responsibility for what happens under their leadership.

In the age 20 – 39 age demographic the answers centered around the Pacesetter, Democratic, Coaching, and Affiliative. They also asserted the need for the use of the Authoritative style is sometimes necessary in the church setting. According to one of the participants the progress of the congregation can sometimes be stymied if the pastor does not step up and say this is how we need to proceed. This focus group unanimously concluded the necessity of not being relegated to one style of leadership. Leadership is situational. There is a time when a pastor must use all the listed styles, except for “Laissez-Faire Style.” Every member of this focus group stated unequivocally that this style is unhealthy for a church. Whatever happens the pastor must not take his or her hands away from guidance. They said, by definition laissez-faire all but removes the leader from the process and in a church that cannot happen because people who do not have leadership can and will either run amok or lose interest. Neither of which needs to happen.

In the age 60 – 79 age demographic the answers were almost identical. They were more vociferous about objecting to the idea of a pastor who makes unilateral decisions. Their disagreement has its basis in one of the most divisive actions in the history of the congregation.

In 1997, the pastor at that time, borrowed \$250,000 for renovations without the approval of the church. In the African Methodist Episcopal system anytime money is borrowed, especially for renovations, it is supposed to be voted on by the entire church body. This did not occur. What is more damaging is when the renovation project was completed roughly \$160,000 was missing – that only the pastor and his trustee can account for. This resulted in the loss of approximately one-fourth of the membership of the church. The remainder of the congregation immediately began to demand financial transparency. Without this transparency the church was coming dangerously close to imploding.

The focus group encompassing the demographic from 40 – 59 had responses like the previous two groups. They were willing to embrace all learning styles except for the autocratic and the laissez-faire. Those two extremes would repel people, in the opinion of this group. This group as did the previous two paused to discuss the issues surrounding the funds which disappeared from the church in the late 1990s. This discussion yielded one of the most vivid responses of this process. One of the participants, who is a lifelong member of the church, said it this way.

“I was in shock. The people involved in this were all people I had been taught to respect. Many were older and I thought they knew better. They wanted to fight one another, some stopped speaking and the entire congregation was in an uproar. I literally cried because it was traumatizing, like if a woman’s first sexual experience [were] being raped.” (Damita Martin. 2020. Interview by author. Memphis. Dec 21, 2020)

This was the most telling comment regarding the financial crisis precipitated in the late 1990s. It was life altering for this member of the congregation because people who were once seen as respectable allowed the situation to turn them into unrecognizable combatants. She has never looked at some of these people the same way. She is not the only one. Once again,

pastoral leadership has determined the mistrust that resides in the church and that has become a part of the congregational culture.

The most colorful of the focus groups was the group encompassing those over the age of 80. They have all been members of the church for over fifty years and have seen at minimum a half dozen pastors come and go. This age group has fully embraced the teaching of their parents and grandparents which is a “throw back” to post-bellum nineteenth century mores in which, “African-Americans tended to treat their clergy as more than just employees of the church—they were royal tribal leaders for the community.” (Evans, 2018 Michael. Kindle Edition Location 130) The three members of this focus group epitomized this ideal. While two of the three of ladies in this group are outspoken, when it comes to speaking about the pastor and leadership styles they step very lightly. They endorsed the authoritative style of leadership along with the pacesetting. They clearly see the pastor as a leader who guides, and they defer to the pastor. They agreed with the 60 – 79 demographics that the pastor shapes the culture the church and the lay leaders guard those ideals. They added a unique perspective by making sure it was understood they are most concerned about the legacy of the church and sometimes lament the decline of the same.

They typify the past-future value time orientation. They “remember when” and they want to see the church be that church again in the future. This group was not very comfortable speaking about major issues involving pastors because they were taught to pray for the pastor and things will get better. They always have their opinions, but they are very hesitant to share them. This group is one who Mary Clark Moschella in her book *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice* cautions researchers to treat gingerly. She asserts some people will say what they believe the pastor wants to hear as opposed to what they are truly thinking because of their view

of the pastor and in many cases the psychological power and sway the pastor or religious leader has over them. (Moschella, 2008, pg. 91) The vast majority of men and women in this age group are not going to say anything they feel will disrespect pastoral leadership therefore, in most cases, whatever the pastor says, short of anything illegal or grossly unethical, they will do.

B. Addressing Congregational Culture through Preaching and Teaching

As previously stated, residual feelings about those two previous situations have contributed to St. James' congregational culture. This local church culture of anxiety and mistrust caused by illegally borrowing and misusing church funds by a former pastor and the autocratic leadership style of another former pastor, must be addressed by teaching and preaching. According to Johnson, Smith, and Tisdale:

The duty of the preacher is to address the relevant needs of the listeners in ways that are grounded in the biblical text and the transforming message of Jesus and that expand to affirm the humanity of all persons.” (Johnston, Smith, Tisdale, 2016, pg. 129)

Preaching that is transformative should contain two basic components. It must be relevant to the listener and it must be grounded in the holy writ. I will add the preacher must be careful to exegete a text in a manner that is not self-serving but illuminating to the congregation. To help transform the culture of the church, one thing that must happen is people must hear, accept, and practice what has been presented to them. Transformative preaching, according to homiletician Cleophus LaRue, involves interplay between five domains of experience:

1. *Personal Piety*: That reflects black experience and provides a framework for the creation and organization of the black sermon is personal piety. Pietism emphasizes “heart religion,” the centrality of the Bible for faith and life, the royal priesthood of the laity, and strict morality. (LaRue, 2011, p. 65).
 2. *Care of the Soul*: Black preaching reflects and is directed to the “care of the soul.” Care of the soul describes that area of experience that focuses on the well-being of individuals. (LaRue, 2011, p. 66)
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3. *Social Justice*: Matters pertaining to racism, sexism, ageism, and other forms of discrimination fall under the scope of this particular domain. Social justice is defined as a basic value and desired goal in democratic societies that includes equitable and fair access to institutions, laws, resources, and opportunities without arbitrary limitations based on age, gender, national origin, religion, or sexual orientation. Racial justice, defined as equal treatment of the races, has been the most prominent component of the social justice domain in black experience. (LaRue, 2011, p. 67)
4. *Corporate Concerns*: Preaching that grows out of reflection on this domain recognizes that there are in black life certain issues and interests that arise out of its unique history and cultural experiences in this country. (LaRue, 2011, p. 67)
5. *Maintenance of the Institutional Church*: Maintenance of the institutional church is vastly important to the ecclesiastical life of the faith community as an institution. Since it is more concerned with ethos than specific acts, it operates at a higher level of abstraction and is more inclined to be coupled with one or more domains in a sermon. (LaRue, 2011, p. 68)

In St. James each of these domains can be used to address the issues of how the culture can be changed it must be changed holistically, not just in pieces. The domains suggested by LaRue ensure that individual as well corporate aspects of the culture are addressed. Individuals have beliefs which manifest in what they value and what they want the church to believe. Those values shape the culture of the church so if we address the domains of personal piety and care of the soul, they serve to help shape the culture because they are designed to plant ideas about how one should live in the community; if enough individuals change the community's culture will change. Communal constructs such as social justice, corporate concerns and maintenance of the institution address issues which will solidify us as a church and as a people. The communal domains need to be addressed because if the community is not strong, the individuals will eventually suffer. If we ignore social justice concerns and corporate concerns our people will be in a position of vulnerability. We as the institution must take care of the individual. If we use each domain, we can more adroitly influence the culture of the congregation.

Each domain must be addressed theologically in sermonic presentations. Personal piety is essential to transformative preaching in the sense that people must take personally and adapt their spiritual walk to their new or clarified understanding of what is being preached and taught. Every believer has a personal stake in the life of the church and when they understand that God has work for them to do and it must be done in service to God's kingdom people will take it most seriously. When it is a matter of their personal spirituality it benefits them because God will be pleased with what they are doing. If they do not step up and complete their individual labors, they run the risk of God being displeased. No believer wants to God to be displeased with them so, when believers understand all of us have a "divine assignment" and we could disappoint or even anger God by not doing it, we will be more apt to do the work and rely on God to show us how.

The domain known as care of the soul, referring to a focus on the well-being of individuals, is just as important as personal piety since it reminds us, we must care for our fellow believers. Throughout the gospels we find Jesus caring for individuals. Physically ill, mentally ill, distressed, homeless, hungry, or without family to take them in; Jesus cared for them all. Jesus also admonished us to "love our neighbor as we love our self." (Matthew 22:39 NRSV) If we love our neighbor, we will care for them. Leaders should care for parishioners and in turn parishioners should care for their leaders, pastor included. This is God's command. If a pastor or leader is not cared for, they will not be able to give the best they have in service to God and others.

The domain known as social justice is firmly imbedded in the life and theology of the Black church. In his seminal work, *God of the Oppressed*, James Cone postulates:

"If we take seriously the clue disclosed in God's Incarnation, namely, the cross and the resurrection of Jesus, then we know that we have a way of cutting through

the maze of political and social confusions. Because the divine has entered the human situation in Jesus and has issued God's judgement against poverty, sickness, and oppression, persons who fight against these inhumanities become instruments of God's Word." (Cone, 1997, p. 90)

The Black church as an institution as imbued social justice as a mandate not an option. There are some who believe they are above these types of actions for a myriad of reasons, but they have forgotten the Black church has, since its inception, has been what Cone described as the "instruments of God's Word." We are meant to be used by God to not only tell the love of Jesus but demonstrate that love by speaking out against the social ills plaguing our communities. This, too, is commanded by God. At some point Black preaching should address these issues and in turn teach others how to speak against them.

Then there is the domain that serves to address corporate concerns. African Americans have a convoluted and often misinterpreted history in this country. Our experience is unique, and we have circumstances as a group of people that we should address internally. No other group of people in this country were enslaved for over two centuries. This unique cultural construct has germinated a myriad of issues that cannot be handled with integrity by anyone but us. Just as Mordecai and Esther found a way to block the wholesale execution of Jews in the Persian Empire. God raises us up as leaders in our churches to address issues such as the one that rose the second week in March 2021 when Senator Ron Johnson , as this draft was being completed, said he was not afraid of the insurrectionists who tried to take over the legislative branch of the federal government on January 6, 2021 because they looked like him, but he was afraid when the Black Lives Matter protestors arrived last summer to protest the murder of George Floyd. This type of issue reminds us that there are people who assume that we as a people are intrinsically destructive and violent. We must be those who speak to our people to help them understand we have a place in God's world that God has designed just for us.

The final domain involves the maintenance of the institution of the church. LaRue's supposition is the culture of the church is shaped by many of the other domains. This domain is somewhat amorphous and relies on the other four to give it shape. Our church is shaped by our personal piety, our approach to social justice, our care of the soul, and addressing corporate concerns of our people. Maintenance of the institution in this manner is similar to the way old testament prophets were viewed as spiritual custodians of the culture. They had the task of preserving the institution by using God's Word and God's words to show people how to live the way God desires for them to live, not the way they want to live.

The interplay between these domains is inevitable. Most sermons will have components of all these domains because they are derived from our experience and our experience takes us to very real places. The implementation and the use of these experiential domains is very fitting for preaching and teaching at St. James because of the two circumstances that have caused a culture of anxiety and mistrust in this church community.

The form of the sermon is another elemental aspect of preaching and teaching that has the potential to transform the hearts and minds of congregants and church culture. O. Wesley Allen writes:

“There are two major phases of sermon development or preparation. The first phase involves deciding what you want to say-choosing a biblical text; interpreting the text; determining the relation of the text to the needs of the congregation/world; settling on a sermonic claim that will engage the minds and hearts of the listeners at the most significant level. The second is deciding how to say what you want to say. This phase involves choosing language, commentary, metaphors, and imagery and placing them in some order that will best invite hearers to consider, engage, experience, assimilate, and live out the message of the gospel you are offering on that particular Sunday or worship occasion.” (Allen, 2008, Kindle Locations 70-74)

C. Preaching, Teaching and Sermon Series

A series of sermons help to provide a balanced approach to an issue or issues being raised in congregations. Sermon series also give the preacher opportunity to address several interrelated topics. In “Crafting a Sermon Series,” Scott Black Johnson writes: “...creating a series is labor intensive, but—done well—these series can: (1) engage preachers in fresh textual study, (2) give congregational questions and concerns new status, and (3) help all participate in conversations of consequence regarding God’s activity and claim on our lives.” (Johnston, Smith, Tisdale, 2016, p. 40).

To address St. James institutional culture of mistrust and anxiety, I developed a teaching and delivered a preaching series entitled “Leaders After God’s Heart”, a phrase adapted from I Samuel 13:13 focused on God deposing Saul of leadership and replacing him with David. The point to the series was two-fold: 1) to show that the pastor needs able assistants for a congregation to be most effective and 2) to delineate characteristics for suitable assistants who will support the leader to be most successful. To find those characteristics I turned to Exodus 18:21. Those characteristics are: (1) capable people (2) people who fear God, (3) trustworthy individuals and (4) integrous people.

I crafted a five-part series. Below, I select Part 1 and Part 5 as examples and summarize parts 2, 3, and 4 of the series to show how preaching and teaching a series can shape and impact congregational culture.

The first sermon was an introduction to the series, and it was entitled, “Why Leaders Need Help.” It contained what I have called the Jethro Model. In Exodus 18: 13-23 we encounter an overworked Moses trying to function as the sole judge and prophet for the Hebrew people. He is visited by his father-in-law, Jethro, who is also a prophet albeit from a different system of beliefs. Jethro stops Moses to tell him, he needs help otherwise he will be of little

ability to effectively lead the people. Jethro convinces Moses he must, for the sake of the people, divide up the work among people who fit the criteria of being capable or able in mind and body, God-fearing, trustworthy, along with having a high level of integrity. Moses is not incapable, but he could quickly become grossly overwhelmed and literally wear himself out.

The lesson one can take from this is, an effective pastor is one who employs able assistants to help carry out the duties of administration. Churches are not to be run by one person who feels as though they must know everything. A mark of wisdom to include as many properly trained men and women as possible in one's administration. If a pastor is not careful, they can hurt the congregation and themselves by trying to do more than they should try to do.

The second sermon was based on the first characteristic listed. Be a capable person. The title was "Good Sense", and the chosen text was I Samuel 25: 23-31, the story of Abigail and her husband Nabal. Abigail was married to a fool who was mean and surly. He refused to help David and his troops while David was running from Saul. David asked for some food and Nabal flatly and surlily answers by saying in verse 10, "Who is David? Who is the son of Jesse? There are many servants today who are breaking away from their masters. 11 Shall I take my bread and my water and the meat that I have butchered for my shearers, and give it to men who come from I do not know where?" David, in his anger, decides he is going to decimate the house of Nabal. Abigail intercedes to protect her interests. She also keeps David from becoming guilty of blood guilt, an ancient tradition that states innocent people cannot be killed vengefully. That type of murder would lead to David being murdered in punishment. Abigail reminds David he has too much to lose and too many other things on which he should focus as opposed to becoming immersed in pettiness. She displays the "good sense" but protecting her house and helping protect David's reputation.

The pastors of today must have people around them who are able or capable, just as Abigail, having the ability to think on their feet and calm contentious situations. The capable assistants to the pastor also need capable people to help them avoid pitfalls. Lay leaders often see and hear things the pastor will not, but they can bring it to the pastor and help avoid a very ugly situation.

The third sermon was based on the second listed characteristic is to fear God. For this sermon I used Genesis 22: 7-14 and the sermon was entitled, “What Fear of the Lord Looks Like.” This sermon is designed to give definition to the term ‘fear.’ It is what I call a biblical character study using Abraham. In this episode of his life, Abraham is instructed by God to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. Abraham has a fear (deep respect, reverence, and/or awe) of God that results in him being willing to do something that makes absolutely no sense at all. How can Abraham be the father of many nations if his “only” son is dead? That is a question that may have crossed Abraham’s mind, but it remained unspoken. We do not have any idea exactly what Abraham was thinking, but we do know he makes preparations and goes to the place God sends him. His fear of God combined with his experience with God created in him the faith that God would handle the situation.

Those of us who are congregational leaders, lay and clergy, must understand anything we do as representatives of God and God’s people we must work as those who respect and reverence the things and people of God. It is impossible to work for a God you do not respect or reverence. God will sometimes command us to do something that seemingly makes no sense, but because God is who God is, we must get the work done.

The fourth sermon in the series was based on the third characteristic listed, which is trustworthiness. The sermon text is taken from Genesis 41: 37-41 and it was entitled “The God

in Me.” In this text, Joseph is has become pharaoh’s second in command after interpreting his nightmarish dream. Pharaoh sees Joseph’s God at work in him and declares, “Can we find anyone else like this—one in whom is the spirit of God?” Due to this epiphany Joseph is entrusted with the task of ensuring Egypt’s food supply is secure. The life of every Egyptian was in the hands of Joseph. It was because of the spirit of God working in Joseph. As a believer in YHWH, he had been endued with the spirit of God and that spirit gave him two attributes which made him trustworthy—honesty and integrity.

When we are in leadership in churches our ability to be truthful can make or break us. Parishioners look to us as guides and those who provide correct information. We are also looked to as those in whom the wellbeing of the church is placed so we must have trust and integrity. Leaders in the church are not perfect beings but the God in us is and that is on what people should rely.

The fifth and final sermon in the series on the final characteristic, integrous (regarding financial gain). This was taken from II Kings 5: 20-27 and entitled Money or Ministry. This sermon documents an episode in the life of Elisha the prophet. Elisha has met Naaman the foreign general with leprosy. Because of Elisha, Naaman is healed of his disease and Naaman’s desire is to do something for Elisha. He offers him a large amount of valuable silver; enough to allow him to live comfortably for several years. Elisha turns him down but Elisha’s servant, Gehazi decides they should take the money. He lies to Naaman about Elisha’s changing his mind and then he lies to Elisha about his interaction with Naaman. Gehazi’s greed, can be traced back to his lack of satisfaction with what God has given along with having a desire for something he was never meant to have. God had always provided for them, but Gehazi wanted more. Elisha responds to Naaman by saying “As the Lord lives, whom I serve, I will accept

nothing!” (II Kings 5:16 NRSV) This clearly means states he is swearing by the name of the Lord. Elisha heals him to show the power of God, not to get paid.

For those of us who are in leadership in the present day, we must be focused on the work of ministry as opposed to trying to get paid. Too often people who are serving God be they lay leaders or clergy leaders are doing so to be paid, not for the sake of blessing others. We must take stock of ourselves, are we Elisha or are we Gehazi. Is ministry more important or is money at all costs and by any means necessary more important.

D. Responses to the Sermon Series

The introductory sermon was met with curiosity. Many people knew about the series through companion Bible Study. I was met with comments such as, “this is a great topic” and “what made you decide to do this?” After the second sermon, “Good Sense,” I was told by one of my chief officers came to visit me to tell me something that he heard from a member that could create problems for me. He ended the conversation by saying, “I’m doing what you said; I’m gonna be your Abigail.” That statement was so encouraging, it meant that not only was he listening, but he was going to apply what he heard to his behavior. Another officer of the church said, “I’ve been doing that for some time, it’s good to know I was ahead of the game.” After the third sermon, “What Fear of the Lord Looks Like,” many people said they had to go back and think about how difficult it can be to do what God says...especially when its not popular. Many congregants, both those in leadership and those who were not, commented on how difficult it is to lead when circumstances are difficult. It led to some being more sympathetic towards those who have the make decisions in the church. The fourth sermon, “The God in Me,” received the most commentary. Those who commented on it focused on how important it is for God to work in us. Many people also came to the new conclusion of having to allow God to work through

them. A few of them took that conclusion a step further and said to be most effective we must let the God in us speak. The final sermon was the one that did not receive many comments. This sermon was entitled, “Money or Ministry.” The one statement I heard was referencing how people used to provide services and not charge the church but now people seem to always be concerned about getting paid. This is especially notable when speaking of musicians according to those who raised the point. So often money becomes a weapon or a way to hold a church or ministry hostage. There comes a point when people must decide is it more important to get paid or to do ministry.

Part IV – Conclusions

The question this project sought to address was “How does African American hermeneutics and preaching influence congregational culture?” The supporting questions are:

1. What drives the culture and behaviors which govern how individuals relate to the unit and how the unit relates to individuals at St. James Church?
2. To what extent does preaching and teaching govern how individual congregants relate to the unit and how the unit relates to the individual?

Here are the answers based on the research I have gathered through surveys and interviews. The culture of St. James is driven by a desire to survive. Survival is in question due to waning membership and stretched financial obligations. The church’s orientation in relationship to time is one of having one foot in the past and the other foot in the present. The church sees itself as being at a crossroads; needing to move forward but being mired in one cataclysmic event. The perceived theft of over \$150,000 was probably the single most traumatic event in the history of the church. Because of this there is a culture of anxiety surrounding finances. People who are intimately involved with the financial planning of the church feel the weight of veiled accusations and those who do not work closely with the finances feel as though

any variant in what they are used to seeing on monthly reports is an indication of something being awry.

Regarding pastoral leadership, the weight of the church's survival land squarely on his or her shoulders. Historically, African American churches have placed their pastors in a place of reverence, placing them on a pedestal that is dangerously high. Again, many people remember the days when one had to arrive almost thirty minutes early to be seated comfortably. Now seating is not a struggle. There is an old saying, "players win games, but coaches lose them." This is applicable to the survival of the church; if it does not survive its death is laid at the feet of the pastor.

The preaching and teaching that took place was designed to teach people, first and foremost, we are a team and if we work as a team, the church will not only survive, but thrive. The new paradigm many scholars and successful pastors are touting is one where there is a place for everyone in the ministry. Not just managing the ministry but becoming a part of the tapestry of kingdom building. One scholar pastor said it this way, "The work that was asked of congregation members in earlier times, participating in running the church, has been changed in this new time to a calling of congregation members to be engaged in ministry try themselves, not simply to manage the church's ministry and the clergy's ministry." (Robinson, 2003, Kindle Edition Locations 1007-1009)

The "Jethro Model" as some have called it is indeed one of the most viable ways to ensure a church or organization can be inclusive and meet the needs of every member. I have concluded this teaching cannot be a one-time endeavor, but it must be lived by me as the pastor and the leadership involved. This is simply a beginning. The congregation must work in tandem

with the pastor to make the congregation the best it can be. This paradigmatic shift takes time and cannot be accomplished instantaneously.

My research has convinced me that African American hermeneutics and preaching influence congregational culture over years, not days or months. Evans asserts, “The historical situation of Black Churches being clergy-dominated stands in need of change. If not, the church will not continue attracting gifted persons into the membership.” (Evans, 2018, Kindle Edition Location 453.) It is possible to shape the culture of a church through preaching and teaching, but it takes years. A singular series of teaching opens people’s minds, but it does not change them. What must occur is consistent, intentional ongoing teaching. Teaching that is grounded in properly exegeted biblical interpretation.

APPENDICIES

APPENDIX A

Sermon 1 – Why Leaders Need Help

Sermon Text: Exodus 18: 13-23

13 The next day Moses sat as judge for the people, while the people stood around him from morning until evening. 14 When Moses' father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, "What is this that you are doing for the people? Why do you sit alone, while all the people stand around you from morning until evening?" 15 Moses said to his father-in-law, "Because the people come to me to inquire of God. 16 When they have a dispute, they come to me and I decide between one person and another, and I make known to them the statutes and instructions of God." 17 Moses' father-in-law said to him, "What you are doing is not good. 18 You will surely wear yourself out, both you and these people with you. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. 19 Now listen to me. I will give you counsel, and God be with you! You should represent the people before God, and you should bring their cases before God; 20 teach them the statutes and instructions and make known to them the way they are to go and the things they are to do. 21 You should also look for able men among all the people, men who fear God, are trustworthy, and hate dishonest gain; set such men over them as officers over thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens. 22 Let them sit as judges for the people at all times; let them bring every important case to you but decide every minor case themselves. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you. 23 If you do this, and God so commands you, then you will be able to endure, and all these people will go to their home in peace." (NRSV)

Being in a leadership role, no matter if it's a sacred post or it's a secular one, requires us to be responsible for many things. Budgets, personnel, buildings, and dozens of other things. The problem is often we try to handle things all alone. Some people will not ever admit to the fact they need help. There are many reasons for this. Reasons for that are as old as civilization itself.

When we examine the chosen text for today shows us a side of Moses with which we are not familiar. This Moses is not the confident man who stood in pharaoh's palace demanding the release of the Hebrew people. This Moses is not the man who boldly stood before the people to tell them, your God sent me to you to fight for your freedom. This Moses we view through the eyes of his father-in-law, Jethro. Jethro sees Moses is struggling with some basic administrative duties. Moses has people surrounding him from sunup to sundown asking for rulings in their quarrels, needing the law interpreted, and mediating dissention among the people. Moses was an adept leader when it came to focusing singly on freedom for the people, but he's not so adept at addressing the day-to-day problems of the average Hebrew. He was inundated with hundreds of decisions to make every day. This was, in Jethro's eyes, going to create more problems than Moses could solve.

Jethro pulls his son-in-law aside to ask him two essential questions:

- 1) What is this that you are doing for the people?
-

2) Why are you doing it alone?

When Moses does respond he says to his father-in-law, the people come to me to ask me to talk to God on their behalf so they will have answers to their questions about the law and have the law interpreted so they can understand what to do and why they are doing it. Jethro tells Moses his intentions may be honorable, but his actions are going to produce irreparable damage. In short, he tells Moses, you need help. But the question that arises is, why does he need help?

There are several potential answers to this question:

Moses could have needed help because his abilities were questionable. There is some evidence of this. After all, Moses did make excuses when God called him. Moses kept questioning God, why me, why not someone who is more qualified why not someone who can speak more eloquently. He seemed to never be sure what to do. He was a better than average shepherd...but what other abilities did he have. Was he strong willed, somewhat? Was he afraid, probably? Was he temperamental, definitely? All these traits would suggest his ability to lead the people could be questionable. After all being strong willed is not bad, but if his will pushed him to focus on something that is detrimental, then his abilities are questionable. Fear could cause him to make decisions based, not on the truth and proper interpretation of the law, but on the whims of his emotions. Temperamental behavior, by definition, is erratic and unpredictable. All these character traits call his abilities into question.

What we must remember one other thing about Moses, he was chosen by God. Anyone who is chosen by God is also trained and led by God. Moses may not have been perfect, but because God chose him, God gave him what he needed to be the leader of the people. Chosen leaders may not be perfect, but God gives them the ability to lead. Moses' abilities came from God, not from himself...so that is not the reason he needed help.

Moses could have needed help because he could not handle the stress. Leadership can be stressful. There are some leaders who have worked themselves into an early grave trying to do too much. Moses had a wife and family plus leading a nation. I would imagine Moses would get up early every day, greet his wife and offspring, go to the place where he would meet the people. He would sit all day, day after day, week after week listening to hundreds of problems. Someone wanted to be out of their marriage, someone else's cow ran away, and the owner may have accused the neighbor of stealing it, a family was having a dispute over a settling the estate of a loved one. There was a myriad of problems with which Moses had to deal and then come back home and hear from his wife and his offspring. He honestly did not get a break. That is indeed stressful, and it would be enough to cause him to throw up his hands in disgust.

But, again, we must remember Moses was handling the job, maybe not doing the best, but he was maintaining. He was not showing any signs of frustration or disgust, he just kept working to the best of his ability because in his mind this was the Lord's work. It was Jethro, not Moses, who made this observation. Moses was content to continue to do the job and believed he was handling it. He did not complain so he apparently was handling stress.

These two answers have some truth to them. His abilities may have been questionable, and he could have felt a certain level of stress, however, the text over and over makes a point to refer to the people...the community of Hebrews. In these ten verses the people are spotlighted ten times. The reason Moses needed help as a leader was the lives and livelihoods of an entire community were at stake. The people were what were most important.

The people being led by Moses had been abused and misused for four centuries. This generation was tasting freedom for the first time. Everyone Moses was leading was used to bondage. Their entire world was servitude. Build this, cook that, fix this, carry that, deliver this message, you name it they had to do it. Now they were free. But with this freedom they needed guidance. They were still learning how to be free and how to interact with this God with whom they are now becoming acquainted. They needed someone to instruct them and direct them. They, in many respects, were like the sheep Moses used to tend. They had no direction and they needed someone to compassionately guide them. That was Moses. That is why Moses was working as hard as he was. He wanted to make sure everyone who needed a word of instruction or guidance from God could get it.

The people were also in danger of giving up on Moses. Jethro was wise enough to see further than Moses. Jethro was an experienced priest. He was not a Hebrew by birth, but he was well versed in human nature. The people could have easily grown impatient waiting to talk to Moses. They could have and may have begun to develop a level of frustration. If you think you were frustrated or impatient while waiting in the early voting line for an hour...imagine waiting eight or ten hours to get to Moses. I would be willing to believe some people did what we do today, we decide to go home and come back the next day.

Moses needed help to establish and maintain order. Without helpers the people would not have been able to progress. They had very little foundation. At this point they were morphing from a group of related people to a nation. This is a job that could not be done well when trying to do it alone. God's people should have the best...they serve a God of excellence and the people in leadership represent God to them. When leaders overwork themselves, they run the risk of wearing out or as it is translated out of the Hebrew, "wither away." In this setting that would be understood as God wearing out. The people were connected to God through Moses and that connection could be damaged beyond repair if their leader, Moses did not get some help.

Just as we have seen with Moses, leaders in the present day also need help. I don't care how intelligent we are, how physically strong we are, how visionary we are...those who lead in the kingdom of God still need others to help them. We need out support system, not because we do not have the ability, not because we cannot handle the stress...both reasons can be true, however, the one reason that is paramount is this...leaders cannot properly guide and direct people all alone. We need a support system.

Jethro was an experienced priest who had a heart for people and when he saw his son-in-law struggling, he, in my understanding of the text was moved by a compassionate and orderly God to tell Moses what he needed to do to best be present for the people. For this to happen Moses needed help. For us to be effective leaders in God's kingdom, we need to delegate

responsibilities. Everyone has a place in the kingdom of God. For some of you, you are meant to do some of the work assigned to the leader. God is not insulted or angered by a leader who says to properly govern the people I need help. A leader who tries to do everything will not do anything well. The people whom God has set us over should have the best part of us.

So, this conference year let us intentionally come together to care for the people...the community of faith. God needs us to walk in unity to bless God's people. No one person can do it all, but when we work together the people are blessed and God is glorified. Let's coalesce to lift up God's people. Let's be the community of believers God has called us to be...loving, compassionate, just, merciful and most of all after God's heart.

APPENDIX B

Sermon 2 – Good Sense

Sermon Text: I Samuel 25: 23-31

23 When Abigail saw David, she hurried and alighted from the donkey, and fell before David on her face, bowing to the ground. 24 She fell at his feet and said, “Upon me alone, my lord, be the guilt; please let your servant speak in your ears, and hear the words of your servant. 25 My lord, do not take seriously this ill-natured fellow, Nabal; for as his name is, so is he; Nabal is his name, and folly is with him; but I, your servant, did not see the young men of my lord, whom you sent.

26 “Now then, my lord, as the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, since the Lord has restrained you from bloodguilt and from taking vengeance with your own hand, now let your enemies and those who seek to do evil to my lord be like Nabal. 27 And now let this present that your servant has brought to my lord be given to the young men who follow my lord. 28 Please forgive the trespass of your servant; for the Lord will certainly make my lord a sure house, because my lord is fighting the battles of the Lord; and evil shall not be found in you so long as you live. 29 If anyone should rise to pursue you and to seek your life, the life of my lord shall be bound in the bundle of the living under the care of the Lord your God; but the lives of your enemies he shall sling out as from the hollow of a sling. 30 When the Lord has done to my lord according to all the good that he has spoken concerning you, and has appointed you prince over Israel, 31 my lord shall have no cause of grief, or pangs of conscience, for having shed blood without cause or for having saved himself. And when the Lord has dealt well with my lord, then remember your servant.”

If my grandmother were alive, she would look across the political and cultural landscape and declare to all listening, “some of them folk don’t have the sense God gave a penny.” Her expression was not grammatically correct, but it shows much wisdom and an acknowledgement that good sense is becoming fleeting. Many who are in leadership in our world, in our country, and even in some of our churches are no longer displaying good sense. A president who keeps telling African Americans he has done more for us than any other president outside Lincoln is not displaying good sense. Pastors and church leaders who insist they are going to have in person worship making the claims, “God will protect us” and “this government cannot force us to close” then they fall ill with COVID19 and many have died. Lack of good sense.

Twenty-first century individuals are not the only people who have lacked good sense. Our text today brings us to the narrative of Nabal and Abigail. They were an affluent couple who lived in a town in Judah. They were Calebites, a sub-nation of individuals who had made themselves a part of the tribe of Judah. If you back up a few verses in this chapter you find a description of this couple. Abigail is described as clever and beautiful, Nabal is described as surly and mean. As the story opens, we are introduced to Nabal, not by name, but by socio-economic status. He has thousands of sheep and thousand goats. He has a sprawling ranch...he also has a bad attitude. His attitude is exposed when David, who was at this point little more than a tribal chieftain who is surviving by either taking or being given resources from small villages he comes

into, asks him to return the favor he did Nabal by protecting his shepherds in the wilderness. Nabal says to the messengers David sends, who is this son of Jesse? Nabal is bold enough to say I am not helping a man who may be a marauder or a vagabond.

The story takes an ominous turn when David decides since Nabal has so rudely rejected his request, he is going to destroy Nabal's livelihood then kill Nabal. This turns into an "I can show you better than I can tell you" moment. David is ready to descend on Nabal's homestead. We have two people violently overreacting. Nabal has an inflated sense of pride, self-worth, and machismo. David has an itchy trigger finger and is ready to fight at a moment's notice. We do not know the origins of their feelings; we just know they are dangerous.

At this point we are introduced to Abigail; Nabal's beautiful, intelligent, able wife. She has been made aware of the situation and she jumps into action. She shows the good sense to move quickly. Her good sense leads her to make take an efficient action. She packs up a large gift, jumps on her donkey and rides to the place she knows David will be. When she arrives, she sees David and immediately begins to plead her case. One thing she makes clear immediately is she is not even going to try to negotiate with her husband because as she states so eloquently, he is a fool. Some translations say he has folly in him, and others say he is base (boorish, unpleasant). Her focus is on the one with whom she believes she can have a relatively civil conversation. She has the good sense to point out to David some important facts regarding what he is about to do.

She says to him:

1. Don't forget who you are – Abigail, using her good sense, reminds David that he has been chosen by the Lord to do the Lord's work. He should not be distracted by such a trivial issue. She makes clear to David that he has been chosen by God and as such he is held not to a higher standard, but to one that is different. What she was teaching David was, no matter how you try to frame it, how you try to explain it when people see you, they expect you to be above certain things. She helped him understand that as a one who is called by God, he had to make sure to keep his reputation and life as clean as possible. Killing Nabal and his servants would have made David culpable of bloodguilt. Blood guilt is a crime in which a person kills another to get revenge for some offense. David's desire was to kill Nabal for no other reason than to avenge the harsh treatment received of Nabal. This is a crime from which there is no excuse or exoneration. Had David followed his first thought he would have committed a crime for which he would be remembered forever. Abigail stopped him from doing something that would have caused people to lose respect for him.

2. Don't forget who you are going to be – Abigail takes this a step further by reminding David of who he was going to be. His destiny was to be, in her words, prince over Israel. He was about to be the ruler of an entire nation and he did not need the death of innocent people on his record as a king. Not only was he destined to be king his offspring would always occupy the throne of Israel. This was a weighty responsibility that was going to carry enough challenges; David needed to prepare now to respond not as a marauder but as a king. Abigail's admonition reminded David that there should not be something this serious hanging over his head as he ascends to the throne. She had a substantive understanding of human nature. She knew people

would not respond well to David if it were ever told he killed a ranch full of innocent men. He would not have ever out lived an atrocity of that sort.

3. Not every battle is yours to fight – Abigail goes one final step to say to David because you are fighting the Lord’s battles the Lord will go before you and fight yours. David was used to defending himself whether it was in the field as a shepherd, as the baby brother of eight, or as the heir apparent to the throne; David was used to having to defend himself. Abigail had the good sense to say to David not every battle is yours to fight. You have step back and let God do the fighting, you just stay out of the way. In this case David may have won a physical battle but he would have done irreparable damage emotionally and spiritually. Spiritually this would have placed an indelible mark on his record, and he was supposed to be executed if he were found guilty in a case like this. Abigail is not only saving his reputation, but she is also saving him from execution.

Abigail’s good sense was able to save David from a critical error. If the truth be told every leader needs an Abigail...especially in the sacred world. As leaders in the church, we all run into Nabals. We need those people who can pull us aside and stop us from going to war with someone or a group of people when what we need to do is allow God to move. There are times in this ministry I have been ready to obliterate someone because they came to me the wrong way. They may have been too harsh, they may have been too blunt, they may have been hypercritical. However, they approached, I could not receive it because of the presentation. But God raised up an Abigail to remind me if you do what you are planning to do there is a strong possibility you will not be able to outlive it. Abigail’s have come into my life to say to me you are called by God, so you will have to handle this in a different way.

Leaders need Abigails to remind us that we need to exercise Good Sense. We need to listen to them and heed their advice and their wise counsel to keep us from making cardinal errors. They remind us we are called by God and we are held to a different standard by our people. It may not be what we think is correct, but it is nonetheless true. Because of this Abigails remind us we are God’s called men and women and as such we need to behave in a manner which reflects our call. There are times we forget we are God’s called and we just respond as people in the world who do not have any connection to the kingdom.

Abigails remind us not only of who we are, but who we are going to be. We all have a destiny in the kingdom, and we do not want what we do today to hinder the destiny God has designed for us. Many times, when we overreact, we forget there is a future and we do not want our future to be destroyed by what we have done in the past. I recently saw a meme on Facebook where a coyote is standing on the edge of a cliff and running to chase a bird. The bird can fly, the coyote cannot and thus he is heading to his death and the caption reads, “Choices made in anger cannot be undone.” We cannot allow temporary anger to wipe out our permanent destiny and legacy. Abigails remind us we have a future that need to be protected. God has a destiny for all of us, but our actions can cause us to be hindered in getting to the place God wants us in. We need Abigail to remind us of our destiny.

Abigails will also tell us, this is a battle you do not need to fight. We do not have to dive head long into a fight when God has promised God would fight our battles. When God called us God also promised us God would fight battles on our behalf. There are some battles in which we need to engage then there are others that God will fight on our behalf. Fighting battles can sap our energy and our drive and God knows this. God does not want us to wear ourselves out nor does God want us to engage in combat that could cause us more harm than good for the kingdom. God has more power, more energy, more stamina, more wisdom than all of us. God knows what we can and cannot do. God is willing to fight on our behalf because we are doing God's work.

As my grandmother said, some folks don't have the sense God gave a penny...and she was right. Good sense cannot be taught, it comes with life experience and an ear for the voice of the Lord. If were not for Abigails we would be in a world of trouble. Every leader needs their Abigail.

APPENDIX C

Sermon 3 – What Fear of the Lord Looks Like

Sermon Text: Genesis 22: 7-14

7 Isaac said to his father Abraham, “Father!” And he said, “Here I am, my son.” He said, “The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” 8 Abraham said, “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” So the two of them walked on together.

9 When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. 10 Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. 11 But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” 12 He said, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” 13 And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. 14 So Abraham called that place “The Lord will provide”; as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.”

I have often said there is only a handful of people who can tell me to do anything and without question I will do what I am told. My mother is one of those people; even in her diminished state, when she calls and tells me to do something, I am compelled to do it. One may ask why...the answer is simple; she is my mother. My mother, due to her place in my life, has earned the level of respect and dare reverence I have for her. It would not be an exaggeration to say, I fear her. Not in the sense of being afraid. But in the sense that I respect her, on a certain level, I reverence her (not worship). I have these feelings for her because she has been there for me, shown me who she is, and what she could do. She is someone who has invested time and energy in me, and she has taken time to help me walk through some trials in life. The longer I live the more respect and reverence I have for her.

Many people feel the same way about their parents. But, but more importantly we should have these feelings for God. If we can fear our parents, we should most definitely fear God. God gave us the parents we love and has done so many more things for us. We understand what fear looks like with our parents, but what does it look like when we relate to God.

Abraham was getting to know God. Abraham was called to leave his comfortable residence in Ur of the Chaldees. He heard the voice of a God whom he barely knew. God called him and he left. He travelled hundreds of miles on hearing God’s voice. As time progressed Abraham began to see God in a way, he had not seen God before. This is a God who blessed him through Melchizedek, this is a God who promised him his descendants would outnumber the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore and this is the same God who gave him a child when we were almost 100 years old. God was making Godself known to Abraham. Everything that has happened to Abraham was so he could have a deeper understanding of who God was. Then there

came a time when God said, I need to know who Abraham is, does he trust me, and does he fear me.

God tells Abraham to take his child and sacrifice him. That would cause anyone to pause because this is his child, the only child remaining. How is Abraham going to be the father of many nations with his “only” son dead? God has done the impossible before, but this one is completely different. This is involving sacrificing his only son. This is a scenario in which God is trying to find out if Abraham respects or fears him. When you fear God there is a willingness to obey when it does not make sense.

Due to the level of fear Abraham has for God Abraham was willing to do obey the command of God even though it made no sense. We do not have to know much about Abraham to know this request did not make sense to Abraham. Abraham was human, he was not perfect, he was not omniscient. Human nature would be for him to ask the question, what is God doing? This is a normal response to what is happening. Too often we forget the father and mothers of our faith were not superheroes...but humans with frailties. Abraham was willing to be obedient. Abraham was willing to sacrifice his only son because he feared God. God had inspired enough respect from him that God could tell him to do something, and Abraham went ahead and did it.

When we as God’s people today hear the voice of God telling to do something, we deem outlandish or nonsensical, we are very slow to obey. Sometimes it is leaving this job and you have no prospect of another position. For others it is pick up the telephone and call a person to whom you have not spoken in years and tell them something directly out of your prayer life. For still others, you have heard God speak saying lay hands on a sick relative or friend so they will experience divine healing. There is a part of us that says this makes no sense. I cannot do this; this one is just a little too much. But they went ahead and obeyed, not because we understood what God was doing, but we feared God, we had enough respect for God we had enough reverence for God to say this makes no sense. When we fear God will sometimes do things that make no sense to us.

Abraham’s fear of God leads him to be willing to obey when it did not make sense. That obedience involved giving up what he may have felt was most important. Isaac’s value to Abraham was beyond price. He was the child of Abraham’s old age. Isaac was not expected but promised. Isaac was the promised child. He was the child who was going to perpetuate the covenant of God and Abraham’s lineage. He was the child who care for him in his old age. This is the child who would be left in charge of everything belonging to Abraham at this death. Isaac was to carry Abraham’s legacy. Isaac was going to represent Abraham when Abraham was not available to travel. Overall, he loved this child with a love that cannot be described. Isaac was priceless to Abraham, but he was willing to sacrifice him because he feared God.

There are many of us in living today who have been put in the position when God may ask us to give up something that is most important to us. It is unimaginable for us today to think God would ask us for our child. God may ask us to give up a relationship (friendship or dating) with someone you feel is absolutely, positively on your corner. God may see this relationship is going to interrupt God’s relationship with us. God may ask us to give up all we have, take up our cross

and follow. God wants to know is there anything that is standing in the way of the relationship. God wants to know is there anything or anyone more important than me to you. God wants to know if we fear God enough to give up things, we deem most important.

Abraham's fear of God made him willing to obey when it didn't make sense by giving up what was most important to him because he was willing to see what others could not see. When Isaac asked his father where the sacrificial lamb was, that meant Isaac did not know he was the sacrifice, nor did he know how the sacrifice was going to take place. He could not see what was going to happen...Abraham on the other hand was able to answer, "God himself will provide the lamb for the sacrifice." He was making a statement of faith. Did he know from where, no. Did he ask God from where, no. Did he believe he would pick one up on the way, maybe? We have no clue what he was thinking, but I have an idea.

Abraham was called by God to leave the comfort of Ur of the Chaldees, followed God through the wilderness into Egypt, then back toward the wilderness and while there he is promised a son and that son was born amidst the confusion he and his wife caused. God cared for him and made provisions for Abraham and Sarah so maybe Abraham decided God did it before God will do it again. He said God will provide.

Believing what we cannot see is difficult. We like to have evidence. We like to know what is going to happen, when it's going to happen, but there are times when every believer must declare, God will provide. We say it because we believe God to be awesome or awe inspiring. We should not be surprised when God provides, we may be surprised by how it happens, but we should not at all be surprised that God has taken care of us again. That is because we serve a God who has proven to be awesome, full of awe, full of wonder. When we choose to do what God commands, even though it makes no sense, even though it may cost us something whose value is immeasurable it shows that we are seeing something that other people cannot see. All this takes place because we fear God.

The climax of the story is when the angel stops Abraham, saying now I know you fear God because you decided you would not withhold anything, not even your only son from me. In God's eyes fear is the willingness to give God the most precious part of yourself out of respect, reverence, and love. When we fear God that means we are willing to go all the way for God and the kingdom because we know how awesome God is, we respect God, and we reverence God. It is an act of worship to say to God I am willing to do anything or to give anything to God.

If we are going to be leaders or support leaders in God's kingdom, we need to fear God. Without the fear of God, we will do or say anything without a thought. God needs to know we can be trusted. God needs to know are we going to be faithful. Are we willing to obey, are we willing give, do we have spiritual sight? That is what the fear of the Lord looks like.

APPENDIX D

Sermon 4 – The God in Me

Sermon Text: Genesis 41: 37-41

37 The proposal pleased Pharaoh and all his servants. 38 Pharaoh said to his servants, “Can we find anyone else like this—one in whom is the spirit of God?” 39 So Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Since God has shown you all this, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. 40 You shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command; only with regard to the throne will I be greater than you.” 41 And Pharaoh said to Joseph, “See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt.”

Trust is a very fragile thing. It is difficult to build and easy to destroy. In every relationship in which we engage trust, or lack thereof, can make or break that relationship. Marriages have ended because of mistrust. Churches have split because of mistrust. Friends have stopped speaking because of mistrust. People have lost jobs because of mistrust. Trust is the bedrock of all lasting relationships.

How is trust built? In some cases, it is a matter of experience. When we are around people for a long period of time, we see their habits, their behavior, we hear them talk and we know whether we can trust or put confidence in what they say or do. Iconic writer/poet/scholar Maya Angelou once proclaimed, “when someone shows you who they are, believe them.” She was correct, our behavior is an indication of a myriad of things...and surely it is a clue to whether a person can be trusted.

In other cases, trust is ascribed. It is automatic based on the position a person holds. We tend to trust accountants who do our taxes and have access to vital financial information. We are taught to trust doctors, we put our lives in their hands. We trust psychologists because we believe they stand between us and mental distress and we believe they can bring us back to wellbeing. We trust them, not because we know them but because we know their professions come with an implicit agreement to not divulge private information.

Then there are cases like the one we read about today in our text. Joseph was in jail after being falsely accused of sexual assault. While in jail he meets two of pharaoh’s servants who had violated some unspoken law. They both have dreams and Joseph, using the ability God gave interpreted them. One of them, the baker, was set to lose his life and the other, the cupbearer, was going to be restored to his position. In three days, this happens, and all Joseph asks is that he be remembered by the cupbearer. But this does not happen until Pharaoh finds himself in a quandary after having some terrifying dreams which needed interpretation. Pharaoh was desperate for answers. He had a vivid nightmare that had him so shaken he calls for his court magicians and religious leaders and there is no one who can interpret this dream. Miraculously, the cupbearer remembered Joseph. He is hauled out of jail, cleaned up, and escorted to the palace. Pharaoh recounts the dream and Joseph immediately knows what it means. A famine is coming that would devastate the entire nation. Imagine for a moment how pharaoh is feeling, the nation that is under his charge is about to see scorching winds and piercing sun that will turn

already dry ground into land that has more crags than a time worn face. The Nile was about to turn from a life-giving artery overflowing with nutrient rich silt into a trickle of water barely forceful enough to carry a leaf. As he heard what Joseph was saying and the dream was doubled in ancient culture meant whatever was being forecasted was going to happen soon and with certainty. What was he supposed to do, he was at a loss.

As his mind is wandering Joseph continues to speak. He gives pharaoh a plan for the salvation of Egypt. He tells pharaoh to choose someone who is discerning and wise to oversee the storage and distribution of the grain. Pharaoh makes a snap decision to make Joseph that person. The person he would trust with Egypt's future. The posterity of an entire nation was about to rest on the shoulders of a thirty-year-old alien slave. No matter who Joseph was, the pharaoh was willing to trust him with this weighty responsibility and there is phrase that pharaoh uses to explain his decision. In verse 38 we hear pharaoh say, "Can we find anyone else like this—one in whom is the spirit of God?" It is the spirit of God that makes Joseph trustworthy. The spirit of God is transformative. When you receive the spirit of God there is something inside you that changes. The spirit of God is meant to produce something new in you.

1) You can be trusted because the spirit of God produces integrity – To have integrity is to engage in ethical behavior and live by a moral standard. When we look at Joseph, we find a man who, because God's spirit was in him had integrity. When the spirit of God is in us and we listen to God, we will abide by a standard not set by us but by God.

If we are God's children, God's followers we will walk in integrity. Everything we do should come from a desire to live, walk, talk, and breath an ethic that would please God. When we have no integrity, we lead people to believe our God is a God who is fickle or fallible. When we are God's followers, we cannot half follow. We cannot pick and choose when we are going to follow or be like God. We will never be perfect, but we must walk in integrity in all we do, because of the spirit of God in us...it produces integrity.

2) The spirit of God produces honesty – Along with integrity Joseph was honest. His level of honesty came from a desire to please God. He was still learning who God was, but he knew enough about God to know and understand God would not tolerate someone who was not truthful...dishonest. Honesty was so important in the life of Joseph because it saved his life while he served Potiphar. Potiphar had to punish him, and that punishment could have been death, but Potiphar also knew his wife, so he opted to have Joseph jailed and there Joseph's destiny was going to be forever changed.

When we have God's spirit in us it compels us to be honest. There is something about the spirit of God that will not let us rest when we, especially those of us in leadership, are not truthful. Because of whom God is, God always speaks truth and when we have the spirit of God in us that same spirit pushes us to do the same. There is something about the spirit of God that will not let us rest if we choose to not speak truthfully. Whether it's at work or at home we are compelled to be truthful, not only in words, but in actions. When we work for God or God's people we must be as honest and truthful as humanly possible because it not only our reputation on the line, but God's reputation also is on the line. So often we are the only God people see or hear and it us up

to us to represent God in a way which shows God to be a God of integrity, love, and justice. We must show God's truthfulness and integrity to all because the spirit of God is in us and it compels us to do the same.

The spirit of God is what makes a believer trustworthy. God intends for us to live by a higher or better standard than the world. The world may say it is permissible to not be honest in words and actions, but if we are a part of God and God's kingdom then we must show ourselves to be like God. We must be honest; we must be trustworthy. We may be all the God someone sees therefore we must maintain a level of integrity, especially when we are leaders or representing leaders in God's kingdom. We, ourselves, are not perfect but the God in us is. The God in us makes us better, gives us integrity, gives us a desire to please God and be who God needs us to be.

APPENDIX E

Sermon 5 – Money or Ministry

Sermon Text: II Kings 5: 20-27

20 Gehazi, the servant of Elisha the man of God, thought, “My master has let that Aramean Naaman off too lightly by not accepting from him what he offered. As the Lord lives, I will run after him and get something out of him.”^[21] So Gehazi went after Naaman. When Naaman saw someone running after him, he jumped down from the chariot to meet him and said, “Is everything all right?” 22 He replied, “Yes, but my master has sent me to say, ‘Two members of a company of prophets have just come to me from the hill country of Ephraim; please give them a talent of silver and two changes of clothing.’” 23 Naaman said, “Please accept two talents.” He urged him and tied up two talents of silver in two bags, with two changes of clothing, and gave them to two of his servants, who carried them in front of Gehazi. 24 When he came to the citadel, he took the bags from them, and stored them inside; he dismissed the men, and they left.]

25 He went in and stood before his master; and Elisha said to him, “Where have you been, Gehazi?” He answered, “Your servant has not gone anywhere at all.” 26 But he said to him, “Did I not go with you in spirit when someone left his chariot to meet you? Is this a time to accept money and to accept clothing, olive orchards and vineyards, sheep and oxen, and male and female slaves? 27 Therefore the leprosy of Naaman shall cling to you, and to your descendants forever.” So he left his presence leprous, as white as snow.

Our society has made an idol of money. We hear people say, “money makes the world go ‘round,” there was a movie made called “All About the Benjamins,” young men are taking selfies flashing thousands of dollars to prove something to the world. For many people money is all they know and all they want. For others money is a means to an end. Either way we wish to view it, the desire for money can and often will turn us into something we never intended to be.

Another issue we find is within the church. Many bible toting believers are convinced having money means you are blessed and NOT having money means you have done something wrong. Many preachers and teachers have done believers a disservice by convincing them if they are believers, they should have wealth as evidence of their prosperity. What is even sadder is it not just in the pew where this is happening. As I scan social media, I have more preachers marketing their wares. Buy my book, come to my conference, make me your life coach and it will only cost you... They may be legitimate and frankly most are, however, there are times when I wonder is it about money or is it about ministry.

Our text today shows us two men, Elisha the prophet and his servant Gehazi. They have been travelling together for some time and this pericope finds them having left the presence of the Aramean (Syrian) general Naaman. Even though the Arameans fought off and on with the nation of Israel; Naaman had found favor with the God of Israel. He did not even realize he had the favor of God, but because he had he was led by a slave girl to Elisha for healing from leprosy. Naaman was healed and converted. He was so grateful he tried to give Elisha a gift, but Elisha refuses... flatly.

However, Gehazi has other ideas, he devises a scheme to get something from Naaman. His thought process was Naaman should give up something. He makes up a story he thought Naaman would believe starring two prophets from Ephraim who were in need. He receives two talents of silver, which if converted to modern standards of weights and measures, equals 151 pounds of silver which is worth \$57,648. He then returns to Elisha as if nothing has happened and if we read between the lines, we are led to believe Gehazi was not planning to share. Gehazi has received this money through a lie and was planning to keep it with a lie. This episode is the personification of dishonest gain. When we put the two men side by side, we see glaring disparities between them in relationship to how they viewed what they were doing.

Elisha was not motivated by money, Gehazi was – In our text Gehazi shows his motivation. He wants to get paid for what has happened. One of the saddest parts of this narrative is all Gehazi did was carry messages. Elisha did the “work” if you will. If anyone deserved to be paid it would have been Elisha, but because Elisha was not motivated by money, his motivation was service, he wanted to see a man healed. He put aside any potential negative feelings about Arameans, he put aside the fact Naaman thought he was “special”, he put aside his personal agenda and ministers to Naaman. He was not expecting any money from Naaman and when we read between the lines, he was more than likely commanded by God to not take anything.

Gehazi decided to profit from the prophet’s actions. Not only does he decide to profit, but he also lies to profit, and he lies to keep profits. Gehazi is motivated by the thought of being able to have a substantial windfall from which he could live. He wanted to be in a position where he felt as though he will not rely on anyone. He saw flashes of how people would see him if he had some money. At this point he was a servant who was following an itinerant prophet across the countryside; but if he had money; he would be somebody. That’s what being motivated my money looks like.

Another stark difference between the two is Elisha was satisfied with God’s provisions, Gehazi was not – Elisha travelled for years with Elijah and he saw what God did for Elijah. When Elisha picked up the mantle, he picked up all that came with being a prophet including the provisions which came from God. Prophets were itinerant. They travelled the countryside from town to town as led by God. There was no such thing as a prophet’s stipend, he did not have a housing allowance or a travel budget. He had to rely on the God who called him and sent him. God provided for him at every turn and he faith that told him God will make sure I have what I need. Sometimes it came from people such as the Shunammite woman who fed him and even built him a room onto her home. When it came to being protected as he travelled, he had angels sent from heaven to watch over him. He trusted God to provide for him and God’s provisions were enough for him.

There is no mention of Gehazi until Elisha encounters the Shunammite woman, so we don’t know much about him, but we find out he is dissatisfied with the way God has been providing. How do we know this? He makes the statement that Elisha let Naaman off too easily. If it were meant for Naaman to give Elisha anything, God would have made that clear. Elisha was sent to Naaman so Naaman could become a believer and not a benefactor. Gehazi appears to have thought all those to whom they are sent would give them something and he was sorely

disappointed when Elisha said no. His disappointment came because he not satisfied with what God gave him. Instead of going to his spiritual father, his mentor to converse about the situation to maybe find out why Elisha refused the gift, he takes the situation into his own hands. He lies to Naaman and he lies to Elisha...all because he was not satisfied with what God had given them.

The final difference is this Elisha was not trying to take what he was not meant to have, Gehazi was – When Elisha was offered a gift for healing Naaman he immediately refused. During his refusal he invokes the name of God. Elisha is close to swearing that he will not take it. He does not take it because the trip was not meant to be a lucrative venture, it was a mission trip. We are not sure of his economic status, but knowing how prophets lived, Elisha probably could have used some extra income. But he makes clear he was not supposed to have this gift, so he declines it. As a servant of God, he knew and understood how to draw the line.

Gehazi, even though he had been told we are not going to take the money, made a conscious decision to take what he was not meant to have. He chose to satisfy himself as opposed to listening to the man of God, whom he served. Gehazi decided he deserved something for his trouble. He was not as focused on ministry as he was money. His decision was based on personal considerations. This is a problem because he decided even though he was told this was not for him to have he took it anyway.

This now raises the closing question for today. Which person are we? Are we Elisha focused on ministry or Gehazi focused on money? When we are leaders in God's house, whether lay or clergy we must decide that money cannot be our focus. If we are motivated by money, we will do anything to get it. However, when we are motivated by the ministry God has placed in our hands, we are willing to put our hands to work and get it done. As those who are called to leadership positions, we must be very clear, we cannot and will not be so motivated by profit. Profits are transitory, but ministry (service) helps build a permanent spiritual home.

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