

*“Leadership and Risk-Taking”*

*I Corinthians 12:12-31a; Luke 4:14-21*

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*Woodbury United Methodist Church, Woodbury, Connecticut*

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We are followers of the biggest risk-taking, life-changing leader in the history of the world, Jesus Christ. We have the most important message the world has ever heard: to love God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength; and your neighbor as yourself.

We must continue to hear again and again that God is love, that God’s Spirit comes to free people from all things that hold us back and weigh us down, and that this Spirit was on Jesus, who is the way to salvation. As we heard in Paul’s letter to Jesus’ disciples at Corinth, we are bearers of that message.

One definition of leadership is *“the art of getting other people to want to do what you want them to do.”* If that sounds like manipulation, it’s not. First, we are all creatures of self-interest and, second, getting others to want to do something both affirms and respects their individual agency. As Christians, it is the art of getting other people to want to recognize their gift or gifts and to love themselves as Christ loves them, so that they might share that love for the transformation of the world.

Still, institutions and organisms—and the church is both—tend to be self-serving and self-perpetuating. We look at Jesus, who challenged the status quo of his day, and know that it led to the cross. As such, we sometimes resist the call to be transformational leaders and risk-takers.

Stepping back for a moment, I may have lost some of you because you don’t think of yourself as a leader. We think of leaders as visible, public, important people: the folks in the news cycle, for example, or church leaders like bishops, superintendents, lay leaders, committee chairs and the like. Yet if we agree that one definition of a leader is *“someone who has followers,”* then nearly all of us have circles of influence. Social media has capitalized on this, with *“influencers”* garnering many followers on matters from the virtuous to the banal. If you’re willing to use your influence and have followers, you meet the criterion of a “leader.”

Here’s something to consider: most of us have observed someone in our constellation of relationship who shows great promise, and we think

or say *“When they make it big, we’ll be able to say ‘We knew her when.’”* This tacitly acknowledges that we do not wake up one day and become a leader. We learn leadership behaviors and the careers they lead to from others. We apprentice. We watch others model leadership and learn it.

While there are certainly people who evidence greater aptitude in leadership than others—Paul would say they have a gift in this area—leadership behaviors can be learned. Learning to work together, to see the gift in oneself and another, to assemble a team, to problem-identify and problem-solve: that are things that can be learned if we expose ourselves to learning opportunities. Some work that we have started at WUMC is to prepare leaders BEFORE they are asked to hold elected office or chair a committee by giving them “on-the-job training” as they shadow current leaders. This is experiential. And, after all, the root of the word “disciple” means “learner.”

Yet I believe the greatest impediment to becoming a leader is a reluctance to take risks. Taking risks might mean failure, either communal or personal. We might be embarrassed or lose credibility. Listen, I get it: I don’t like taking risks and imagine some of you don’t either. And the phrase “taking risks” implies something foolhardy instead of a thoughtful calculation preceding action that doesn’t guarantee success. Would it feel better if instead we called it *“stepping out in faith?”* Jus’ askin’.

As we consider this risk-taking, faith-stepping business, I’m also reminded of the question, *“Why can angels fly?”* The answer is *“Because they take themselves lightly.”* I’m fond of saying *“We’re building the plane while we’re flying it”* because, honestly, if we wait until the plane is built and the conditions are perfect, we’ll never get off the ground. The Wright Brothers failed multiple times over years before their historic December 17, 1903 successful sustained, controlled flight of a heavier-than-air craft. But maybe their biggest challenge was not technical or mechanical, but spiritual. You see, seven years before, in their hometown of Dayton, Ohio, a preacher declared, *“If God had meant man to fly, he would have given him wings.”* Who was this preacher? He was Milton Wright. Bishop Milton Wright, a bishop in the United Brethren in Christ, one of the predecessor denominations of The United Methodist Church. Oh, yes: and he was Orville and Wilbur’s father.

Sometimes the lack of support from those closest to us makes us reluctant to take risks. Speaking personally, while I was ready to come to you last March, it was a team decision. Without Carol's enthusiastic support, I could only have done it halfway, if at all. So thank her if things go well, and blame me if they don't.

We see this dynamic in today's Gospel. Today's reading from Luke includes Jesus' message inaugurating his ministry. Quoting Isaiah 61, it was bold and risk-taking, especially inasmuch as it was delivered to the home-town folks. The reading stops short of their reaction, but you can read it beginning with verse 22 or listen to it and my interpretation next Sunday. Suffice it to say the folks who knew him said, in effect, "*Who does he think he is?*" They were angered with his application of Isaiah's prophecy to himself. Yet Jesus risked their disapproval—and ultimately their nearly deadly rage—because he was driven by a burning vision: the rule and reign of God revealed on earth.

This congregation, too, has a vision, patterned on Jesus' ministry: to be "*a welcoming Christian fellowship who celebrate and share God's love with everyone.*" If you don't think that's risk-taking, think again. Everyone? Some of you know the Rev. Kenneth Kieffer, our former District Superintendent, whose retirement was announced just three weeks ago. Ken once said the three most dangerous words of the church are "All are welcome."

Yet here we were yesterday, 25 of us attending Planning Retreat VISION 2025: all who were able to respond to the invitation to which all were welcome. Attendees ranged in age from 14 to 85, including high school students and young adults as well as those of us...well, shall we say a bit older. We evaluated last year's vision foci and looked ahead to 2025 and heard about spiritual practices and reflected on leadership. I'm sure we'll have a summary of that, but here are a few takeaways:

Woodbury UMC members love their church and The United Methodist Church and are willing to invest time, talent and treasure in its vitality.

One definition of leaders is "people who have followers." By that definition, all of us have some capacity to influence others.

Woodbury UMC wants to make a difference in our community and our world, expanding our outward focus through such ministries as Helping Hands, the Mission to Ecuador and the Transition Academy.

Woodbury UMC wants to grow in living out its mission statement that *“We are a welcoming Christian fellowship who celebrate and share God’s love with everyone.”* Because everyone means everyone.

Woodbury UMC wants to share the experience of a profound encounter with Jesus Christ thru the practice of Testimony; and to examine possibilities in other Models of Evangelism.

Woodbury UMC wants to continue to work toward the goal of Congregational Vitality and Growth (Spiritual Wellness, Financial Health and Inviting Facilities), so that we are a strong mission station from which such ministries can be launched.

Woodbury UMC want to continue to build on its Communication ministry through improved internal and external communications, including the improved use of communication tools such as the website, social media and Breeze, a membership database.

There was much more in yesterday’s session, more than I can summarize here, but one visual is for you to visit the Assembly Room after worship—the room adjacent to the church office—and see plans and ideas for 2025.

There will always be skeptics, of course. Some might say that such actions are only a drop in the bucket compared to the great needs around us. So I close with this story from Joel Barker, a nationally recognized communicator about leadership. He tells of a man walking along a beach early in the day. He sees something moving in the distance. As he approaches, he sees it is a woman: stooping, bending, then making some motion toward the ocean. As he drew closer he could see the woman reaching down, picking up a starfish that had washed up on the beach and throwing it back into the ocean.

*“What are you doing?, asked the man. “I’m throwing these starfish into the ocean,” replied the woman. “But why?” pressed the man. “Because the sun is coming up and these starfish will die if they do not get back into the water.”*

The man scoffed. *“There are thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands of starfish along this beach, for miles and miles. Surely you don’t think you can make a difference?”*

The woman said nothing, staring at the beach and the ocean beyond. Then she stepped forward, picked up the next starfish, and heaved it into the ocean. She turned to the man and replied, *“It made a difference for that one.”*

Leaders are called to take risks. Congregations are called to take risks. Each of us is gifted by God, our gifts to be used for the transformation of the world. As United Methodists, we are called *“to make disciples for Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.”* Your gift and your life make a difference. Let us be willing to serve, to lead, to take risks, and to spread the love to which Jesus’ life, death and Resurrection is eternal witness. Amen.