

“A Call and Response Approach to Church”
2 Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10; 2 Corinthians 12:2-10; Mark 6:1-13
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As we pursue multicultural relationships today, many remember the pulpit exchanges of another time and wonder if they might still be helpful. It is not a bad thought, but over time we have realized there are problems with pulpit exchanges. For one thing, they can be superficial, a way of claiming common ground that only exists in name. We have common ground in Christ, but we only experience this at a meaningful level when we take time to get to know each other. But another problem with pulpit exchanges is that it is a nightmare to preach in a church like ours when you come from a predominately African-American Church.

It's not bad when you move in the other direction. Preaching in a church where there is a tradition of call and response is energizing. It takes a moment to settle in and adjust to the rhythm of any congregation, but once you do, it is wonderful. Not all responses are straightforward words of affirmation like “Amen” and “That's right!” Sometimes you hear “Make it clear” which means “I don't know what you are saying” or “Come on up now” which means “You need a little more energy.” But at least you know when you are connecting. Preaching is a conversation, a dialogue, and when you are used to that and experience a monologue where the only response is occasional laughter, it's tough.

I say all of this not because I want to change the way we worship, though I am “O.K.” with a well-placed amen. There are different ways to worship and what is most essential is that we are authentic. We have to be who we are, learn from each other and thus enrich our experience, but still relate to God authentically. But I call attention to the call and response approach to preaching and worship because it provides an example of how we ought to do church as a whole.

Some churches spend a lot of time talking about leadership, assuming that everything depends on one role and if only they had the right preacher or musician, all of life would change. Other churches

focus solely on the community of faith, as if leaders are incidental. We need a dialogue, a conversation, the creative interaction of leaders and the community. We need a call and response approach to church.

The texts we have read today make it clear that faithful leadership requires a fully engaged and supportive community. Consider the reading from 2 Samuel. David has been anointed as king in advance by Samuel, even before the old king, Saul, has died, but now that Saul has, David is anointed again by elders of all the tribes of Israel at Hebron.

We have been following David's story for a number of weeks. We know how successful he will be as king, even with all of his flaws. He is the one God chooses and, unlike Saul, he does not disappoint. He unites the nation, he extends the borders, he restores proper worship, taking the ark to its proper place. The text says he is only thirty years old when he becomes king. He is still a bit wet behind the ears, we might say, but he reigns for forty years and it is quite a reign!

And yet, David cannot do any of this alone. He has to have the support of the elders. He has to have all the tribes working together and respecting his role as king. He has plenty of leadership skills and qualities – boldness, vision, courage, insight. But all of these skills added together would not be enough without the community around him.

In like manner, consider the reading from Mark. If we are to take this story seriously, even Jesus needs a supportive community to carry out his ministry. He returns home to Nazareth to teach, preach and heal, but he encounters much resistance there. “Where did he get all this wisdom?” they ask, “Isn't this Mary and Joe's kid?” In other words, “Just who does he think he is? We remember him when he was a pint-sized little nothing!” Familiarity does breed contempt, it seems, or as Jesus puts it, “Prophets are not without honor, except in their own hometown.”

But it's not just that the hometown folk refuse to respect him, mostly out of jealousy, no doubt; it's that he cannot do much ministry there because of their resistance. Mark says they take offense at him and thus, Jesus can do no deed of power there, except that he lays his hands

on a few sick people and cures them. Even Jesus cannot do it alone. He needs a supportive community of people among whom to minister.

The message is clear. The effectiveness of any endeavor depends upon both the leader and the community and how the two interact. This is true of just about any enterprise. Leaders like King and Gandhi and even Hitler in a different way all had gifts, but also many followers and thus the credit or blame for accomplishments, good and evil, has to be shared between leaders and followers. All significant achievements and movements depend upon a creative interaction between leaders and community. But in the church especially, this interaction is critical.

One example of this reality lies in the concept of a free pulpit. It has been a part of our tradition since the beginning of this church, an unquestioned principle central to Baptist identity and necessary for preaching. Yet there can be no truly free pulpit without a truly free pew.

In Baptist tradition, no one speaks with the sole authority of God in an unquestioned way. Each of us is a priest with not only the privilege but also the responsibility to read scripture and discern matters of faith. This does not limit the freedom of the pulpit. It enhances it. Only when I trust that you will square things with your conscience before acting on anything I proclaim do I feel free to proclaim what I sense God's word to be. Pulpit and pew must interact, share responsibility, work together.

Another example of this interaction is with the long history of leadership in this church which includes clergy and laity. I am the twenty-sixth pastor in this church's 206-year heritage, though several pastors were repeat offenders, they served here more than once, but present company excluded, the list is a who's who of Baptist leaders – former seminary professors and a president, a future university president, key leaders in Baptist life like Thomas Skinner.

Yet anyone who knows this church's history knows about key lay leaders like Fannie Heck and Sallie Bailey Jones, founders of the Woman's Missionary Union in this state; Ed Vick who named the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship; and Thomas Meredith, who was a minister but not a pastor here when he played a critical role in what has become Wake Forest University and the women's college in Raleigh which bears his name. These are just a few of the people associated with

our church who have shaped Baptist life. There are many more who have shaped this life of this church. They are a mix of clergy and laity.

One other example of just how critical the interaction of leaders and community is can be found in the ministerial role we have not yet filled – Minister with Community. I have said a number of things in subtle ways over the past several months to try to shape a good experience for the person who enters this role. Today I want to be blunt. It is critical that the person we bring in has the right mixture of energy, insight, perseverance and passion to lead our efforts to connect better with the community around us. But one person cannot do it all or make us into people we are not and don't want to be.

So, it is equally critical that we bring the right mixture of openness, flexibility and commitment, as well as an understanding of the reality that some bold new efforts will fail. Our tolerance for failure may be the most important gift we can provide for this new role. But the key insight here is that, as is the case with every other area of ministry, this new work will require the best efforts of a leader and the community.

Yet, if you have been paying attention and thinking critically for the past few minutes, exercising your freedom in the pew, you may be wondering whether there is not still something missing, and you would be right. No one can do the work of ministry alone. We need the help of others, the faithful engagement of the community. But don't we need something else, Someone else, as in God? Yes, we do.

The reading from 2 Samuel closes with these words. "And David became greater and greater, for the Lord, the God of hosts, was with him." Jesus was with God and God was with him throughout his journey. And Paul, in his second letter to the Corinthians, boasts of his weaknesses, not his strengths; says that when he is weak, he is strong. This is not some kind of spiritual game where we pretend we don't have gifts that we do. Paul's strength comes in his weakness because this allows him to point beyond himself to Christ which means he is not alone. Christ is present and at work in him.

We need a call and response approach to church, a dialogue or conversation, a creative interaction of leaders and community, but we

also need to remember that we are not alone. God is with us, as God is with David, Jesus and Paul. We are guided by the Holy Spirit every step of the way. And so, like Paul we realize that even when we are weak, we are strong because we are able to point beyond ourselves to Christ. It is not individual insight or shared wisdom that makes the church great; it is the grace of God we know together in Christ.

Our hymn of devotion today puts it this way (“We Are God’s People” by Bryan Jeffrey Leech).

We are God’s people, the chosen of the Lord,
born of his Spirit, established by his Word;
our cornerstone is Christ alone, and strong in him we stand:
O let us live transparently, and walk heart to heart and hand in
hand.

We are a temple, the Spirit’s dwelling place,
formed in great weakness, a cup to hold God’s grace;
we die alone, for on its own each ember loses fire:
yet joined in one the flame burns on to give warmth and light, and
to inspire.

Amen! It takes all of us together allowing the grace of God to work through us to make a difference. But when we do that, what a difference we can make!