



INSTALLATION OF OFFICERS/LEADERS (AND CELEBRATION OF ALL CHURCH LEADERS)

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

(See today's worship unit for a sample Installation of Officers service.)

Sunday, January 3, 2010

Ray A. Owens, Guest Lectionary Commentator

Senior Pastor, Metropolitan Baptist Church and Assistant Professor of Ethics and Black Church Studies, Phillips Theological Seminary, Tulsa, OK

Lection – Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 9) Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. (v. 10) For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. (v. 11) Again, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone? (v. 12) And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

On Sundays my grandmother served as the secretary of the senior choir, chairlady of the Pastor's Aide and President of the Ruth Circle. The other six days of the week she did "day work" in the homes of affluent white families—cleaning, cooking, and caring for their children. The rather remarkable role reversal between her "day work" and her

“church work” is representative of the contradictions encountered by so many black church leaders from my grandmother’s generation. Historically, blacks, whose non-ecclesial work has been limiting and at times hostile with respect to their professional development, have turned to the church as a space for nurturing and exercising their leadership capacities. The poorly-paid school custodian who takes his orders from others all week long becomes the Chairman of the Deacon Board, giving orders and directing others the moment he enters God’s house.

The significant growth of the black middle class and the 2008 election of the first African American President of the United States highlight the progress that has been made in terms of increased leadership roles for blacks in non-ecclesial contexts. However, African American churches remain vital sites of leadership development even today. The occasion of installing church officers and leaders offers an excellent opportunity to reflect on and promote viable Christian leadership principles for today’s churches and their leaders.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

The age-old adage, “It’s lonely at the top,” encapsulates the sometimes isolative experience of leadership roles inside and outside the church. Such feelings of isolation can easily lead to burnout and ultimately the loss of potentially effective leaders for the church. In churches all over our nation there are pastors, ministry presidents, chairpersons, and directors who are suffering from burnout and disillusionment due to the feelings of isolation that often attend the leadership positions which they hold.

The good news for those in positions of leadership is that it does not have to be lonely at the top. In fact, embedded in this passage are the ingredients for a collaborative model of leadership that addresses and overcomes the theme of isolation.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

This text is lodged in the riddling ruminations of a wise leader who contemplates the meaning of life with all its complexities, ironies, and contradictions. One such irony is the sense of isolation that commonly accompanies achievement. The sometimes isolating consequences of one’s toil are illustrated with the example of the person whose work and wealth are rendered meaningless by the absence of companionship (v. 8). This theme is developed more fully in the verses that follow.

The example of the accomplished person who lacks the benefit of companionship leads Qohelet, the speaker in Ecclesiastes, to conclude that two working together are better, and in fact more profitable, than one working alone (v. 9). The increased profit margin attached to collaborative work should not be understood to refer simply to wages or material gain.¹ Rather, the reward refers to a much wider scope of benefits, such as increased productivity, increased efficiency, and increased capacities that come when the

skills of one person complement the skills of the other person. Qohelet employs three illustrations in the following three verses designed to substantiate his call for collaborative work. Appropriated in the context of church leadership, his insights reveal the rewards of communal and collaborative forms of leadership.

Helping Hand

The first illustration defending the thesis that two are better than one is set in the context of the dangers involved in traveling through the difficult terrain of the ancient world. The threat of falling refers to the potential of falling into a deep pit, possibly one that was somehow concealed (v. 9).² A lone traveler would have no one to help lift her or him from such a condition. However, with a companion, one enjoys the benefit of a helping hand.

Of course, the image of falling connotes a much broader meaning than the literal sense of the term. This text extols the benefits of companionship for all who fall into places of vulnerability, difficulty, and hardship. It is always better to have a helping hand in the person of a trusted companion to lift us out of the low places into which life can lead us.

For those in positions of church leadership the presence of helping hands will prove essential to their success. When the demands of leadership lead one to falter, fall or fail, the support system inherent in the structure of shared leadership can easily facilitate the work of lifting and restoring the one who has fallen.

Warm Presence

The second of the illustrations offered by Qohelet speaks to the very practical advantage of companionship. In verse eleven, he describes the value of the physical warmth that one person can provide to another on a cold night. It should be noted that this image of two who lie together does not refer to lovers. Rather, it refers to any two people who lie together for the purpose of keeping warm.³

Below the surface of its most narrow and obvious interpretation, there is a much larger meaning to this text. Warmth functions as a metaphor for the comfort that human companionship offers in a harsh cold world. In this regard, the text opens up fruitful possibilities for contemporary church leaders.

The loneliness that too often attends positions of church leadership is frequently caused by the chilly attitudes and actions of others. Sometimes envy, mistrust, and disagreement lead people to act toward their leaders in ways that feel cold and isolating. Yet, when leaders employ communal and collaborative styles of leadership, they are empowered by the help of companions who bring a warming presence to the sometimes, chilling work of leading others.

Personal Protection

The final illustration of our text again employs the dangers of travel as its context for illumining the advantages of companionship and collaboration. This time, rather than falling down in treacherous terrain, the threat involves falling prey to violent attackers

(v.12). In such situations, Qohelet contends that having a companion increases one's capacity for self-defense.

To be sure, church fights are some of the most painful fights to endure. Often, leaders feel as though they are constantly on the defensive, having to fend off the emotional and verbal attacks of other congregants. The idea of shared responsibility and commitment, as promoted in this text, offers a viable option to the lonely and losing battles many church leaders face.

Along these lines, another leadership adage surfaces as an attractive alternative to the notion that "it's lonely at the top." "People support what they help create" is a principle that resonates with the vision of cooperation and collaboration implied by our passage. Leaders who maximize the involvement of others in their leadership pursuits secure for themselves access to the rewards that are derived from human companionship—helping hands, warm presence, and personal protection.

Celebration

Those who are called to positions of leadership in our churches, whether they are pastors or choir presidents, play instrumental roles in the work of advancing the mission of our churches and the Kingdom. Though leadership always comes with challenges, we can find hope in the knowledge that our leaders have a reservoir of help, warmth and protection in the many members who make up the body of Christ. So, today we give thanks for all who courageously stand to lead.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Sights: Partners working together in unity (v.9); a friend reaching down to lift up a friend (v. 10);

Sounds: The sound of the harsh cold wind (v. 11);

Textures: The rough terrain of the ancient near East (v. 10); and

Smells: The scent of sweat from human toil (v. 9).

Notes

1. Crenshaw, James L. Ecclesiastes: A Commentary. Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1987. p. 111.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.