



PASTORAL INSTALLATION SUNDAY

CULTURAL RESOURCES

Sunday, January 24, 2010

Terri Laws, Guest Lectionary Cultural Resource Commentator

Doctoral Student, African American Religion, Rice University, Houston, TX

I. Introduction

A pastoral installation is simultaneously a celebratory and sober moment in the life of a community of believers. The moment is also a culmination and commencement. It celebrates an individual's preparation and experience that has brought him/her to the place where members of the body have agreed to affirm that he/she has the capacity to lead and serve them.

The moment marks, with sobriety, the commencement of the responsibility to lead and to serve while beginning the process of melding a congregation with its new leader. A new leader brings the promise and opportunity to reshape both the leader and people. Leadership requires knowledge and understanding. Understanding one's role and gaining knowledge of the needs of the congregation will equip the leader to accomplish the mission of the local body and assist the congregation to use their gifts in the imitation of Christ within the church walls and beyond.

II. Pastors Are Equippers

The person who is an equipper participates in a number of actions. To equip involves the process of providing what is needed. This can be opportunities, training or material goods. The equipper can adopt a variety of styles to achieve the goal of an “equipped” person, church, or organization. One approach is to identify what is needed and to impose what and how it gets achieved. Another style may allow flexibility in how the goal is reached yet be firm on what needs to be achieved. The church as an equipping organization is an adult learner environment. Adults often learn well with practical opportunity infused with theoretical concepts.

III. Biographical Testimony (Pastor, Benjamin Elijah Mays)

We usually think of the work of equipping in the context of a pastor and a congregation. Yet, the life of Benjamin Elijah Mays demonstrates that equipping is not limited to the local body of believers. His equipping began with himself and became a life of service dedicated to the elevation of African Americans and racial equality. Mays held a pastorate early in his career—even as he taught at a nearby college. But he is best known as the long-time president of Morehouse College. Using that office, he served as leader and mentor to a generation of students and churchmen —most notably Martin Luther King, Jr. Rooted in his life experience, Mays became dedicated to the elimination of the notion of black inferiority, and he promoted excellence by African Americans. Even after he left the local pastorate, Mays remained an equipper as an educator-churchman-social leader who helped to build institutions and organizations, especially in the black community, that continue to serve the Church and society.

Benjamin Mays was born in Ninety Six, South Carolina to tenant farmer parents who had both been born slaves.¹ His mother was unable to read, but Mays eventually earned a doctorate of philosophy in religion from the University of Chicago. Before he was seventeen, Mays attended school no more than four months each year; he was needed to pick cotton to help the family survive. Due to his inconsistent opportunity to attend school, Mays was unable to graduate high school until he was twenty-one.² After high school, Mays held jobs as a Pullman porter and dishwasher to provide for his own expenses while he attended classes at college as well as while he was in graduate school.



After a year at historically black Virginia Union where Mays was a straight-A student, Mays sought a college in the Northeast that would admit him despite his being African American.³ At Bates College in Lewiston, Maine, Mays lived in a relatively integrated world. He still experienced racial discrimination, but he achieved at new heights that helped him to confirm what he had believed: that blacks are not inferior to whites. In his first semester at Bates, he earned his first grade of “D,” well below passing.⁴ But in the end, he proved to himself that he could compete in an integrated world and he found this liberating—liberating from the stereotype of black inferiority. He became the captain of the debate team and, when blacks were finally

admitted to Phi Beta Kappa fifteen years after his 1920 Bates graduation, it was his work in Lewiston that gained him entry.⁵

After graduating from Bates, Mays enrolled at the University of Chicago. His education there was interrupted when he took a job at Morehouse College to teach mathematics and psychology. While in Atlanta, the congregation of a church near the Morehouse campus, Shiloh Baptist, asked Mays to serve as its pastor. As he recalls in his autobiography, Born to Rebel, the congregation was not formally educated, yet very intelligent.⁶ He writes that his University of Chicago Divinity School training was not helpful in that setting, but he had no problem preaching to this congregation. He notes that he “attempted to speak to their needs and they responded warmly and well.”⁷

In 1924, Mays took a leave from the Shiloh pastorate and left Atlanta to return to the University of Chicago.⁸ He enrolled in the master’s program with an emphasis in the New Testament. He finished the master’s program in 1925. Although Mays had planned to continue to earn a Ph.D., he interrupted his education again when the president of his high school alma mater prevailed upon him to return to South Carolina to teach English in the college department of the Orangeburg school. Mays returned to the University of Chicago for a final enrollment in 1932. This time he was determined to complete doctoral studies. By 1934, Mays had completed Ph.D. coursework and accepted the position of dean of the Howard University School of Religion when it was offered by Mordecai Johnson, the first black president of the university.⁹ This position was the starting point for the career for which Mays would become best known—as college administrator.

He identified six goals for equipping the faculty, staff, students and the institution itself:

- 1) Increase student enrollment;
- 2) Improve the faculty;
- 3) Improve the school’s facilities;
- 4) Enlarge and improve the library;
- 5) Establish an endowment; and
- 6) To achieve accreditation from the American Association of Theological Schools.¹⁰

When Mays left Howard six years later, only his goal for improving the School’s physical plant had not been achieved, and it was under discussion.

It was 1940 and Mays was headed to Atlanta to become president of Morehouse. In his acceptance letter to the chairman of the Morehouse board of trustees, Mays again showed his interest in faculty as the foundation for creating a place for excellent education for students. He noted, from his careful investigation of the situation before accepting the position, that the salaries of the faculty were too low. He soon also learned that their number was insufficient. Not only would he need to hire more teachers, but also better trained ones.¹¹

From Mays’ interpretation, Morehouse was one of the weaker links in the Atlanta University collaboration which included Spelman College, Morris Brown College, Atlanta University (that taught graduate programs), and Clark College. In his philosophy, the strength and weakness of

the whole rests in the fate of the least. He needed to improve the standing of Morehouse among the other schools.¹²

Just as he had done at Howard, Mays always felt an obligation to the original intents of the founders. At Howard, one of those avenues was through religious education. The connections to training students for the ministry had been even stronger at Morehouse, where such an education had been the primary reason for the founding of Morehouse. But by 1940 when he arrived, Morehouse had become significantly focused on its liberal arts education. So, too, just as at Howard, Morehouse trustees had decided to drop its bachelor of divinity degree program.¹³ Mays felt an obligation to the founding training emphasis, but thought he could improve the religious education component only through a unique collaborative agreement.

With efforts beginning just two years after arriving at Morehouse, he saw the opportunity to repeat some of his successes at the Howard University School of Religion. Prior to the Howard School of Religion accreditation, Gammon, in Atlanta was the only predominantly black seminary accredited by the Association of Theological Schools. So, collaborating with Gammon, Mays sought to repeat this success with the Morehouse School of Religion. It took until 1958, but Mays was instrumental in establishing the Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC) as an accredited black seminary. He joined the Morehouse School of Religion with Gammon and Morris Brown's seminary, Turner. The Christian Methodist Episcopal Church moved their seminary from its founding place at Lane College in Jackson, Tennessee to form the fourth school in the collaboration.¹⁴ Later, the Church of God in Christ opened a seminary and located it on the same campus. Mays counted his part in the establishment of the ITC as a proud accomplishment for the Morehouse School of Religion as well as for it leaving him the opportunity to focus more energy on building up Morehouse College.¹⁵

Benjamin Mays retired as president of Morehouse in 1967. The prominence of his reputation was gained primarily for that role. In his 1971 autobiography, Mays described himself this way: "I am basically a 'race' man. I believe in the black man's ability, and my heart leaps for joy when a Negro performs well in any field."¹⁶ Even so, he credits much of his success at building up Morehouse with his drive to hire excellent faculty without regard to race or religion. Highlights from his life demonstrate that his vision for black achievement lie in his work to strengthen black institutions as systems of community infrastructure as a place to foster black achievement. His strength as an equipper rests upon his establishment of this sort of institutional vision rooted in individual gifts, talents, and excellent hard work.

IV. Songs That Speak To The Moment

These three songs speak to God's faithfulness in bringing the pastor and the body of believers to their moment of mutual celebration and joining. They also encourage all believers to move out as equippers into the congregation and society in the power of God's living Holy Spirit.

Great is Thy Faithfulness

Great is Thy faithfulness, O God my Father,
There is no shadow of turning with Thee;
Thou changest not, Thy compassions, they fail not,

As Thou has been Thou for ever wilt be

Chorus: Great is Thy faithfulness! Great is Thy faithfulness!
Morning by morning new mercies I see;
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided,
Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord unto me!

Summer and winter, and springtime and harvest,
Sun, moon and stars in their courses above,
Join with all nature in manifold witness,
To thy great faithfulness, mercy and love.

Chorus

Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth,
Thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide;
Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow,
Blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside!

Chorus¹⁷

Lead Me, Guide Me

Lead me, guide me along the way.
Lord, if you lead me I will not stray.
Lord, let me walk each day with Thee.
Lead me, oh Lord, lead me¹⁸

Use this final song at the close of the celebration as an agreement to go forth in the spirit of believers using the gifts with which they have been equipped for ministry.

I Can Do All Things through Christ

I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.
I can do all things through Christ.
I can do all things through Christ.
I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.¹⁹

V. An Illustration

Is yours an inclusive equipping? While I was in seminary, I shared that experience with a wonderful man, excited to be in his first pastorate, just before we graduated. He thought of himself as very supportive of women in ministry, and I had known him to make public comments suggesting to our male colleagues to be the same.

One day while he was describing the historic congregation he was serving, he noted that no women from the congregation had heard the call of God to serve as a ministry leader. Since he

had previously told me about the distinctly conservative nature of the congregation, I was bemused by the sheer logic of his statement.

“Not once in over 100 years, has a woman been called of God to ministry from that congregation?” I asked. The look on his face was puzzled acceptance of the statement. I asked again, “Not once?”— thinking he might mull over what he had said and wonder about it. “No. Not once,” he responded without figuring out why what he was agreeing to seemed to have an odd ringing in his hearing.

Are men and women, boys and girls “with ears to hear” being equipped to discern his or her call to all of the ministry leadership roles listed in our Scripture verse? Women now make up nearly half of the students in seminary classrooms. Are men and women in the church where you serve or worship being equipped and *nurtured* to become apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers? Is there a process in place to identify these needed gifts? Are gifts for these offices in the body of Christ being supported through formal education as well as informal, practical training and practice opportunities—without regard to gender, age, class, etc.?²⁰

Shape the worldwide Church by equipping the body where you are stationed. Consider these questions along with the other factors your congregation uses to identify new leadership.

VI. Memorable Learning

A new pastor or installation planning committee can declare its intention to be an inclusive, multi-generational equipping station by beginning with the installation ceremony. Include elements of the past, present and future of the life of the congregation. Embody those moments by assigning speaking parts to males and females. Traditionally, African American churches have been a place where youth gained their first opportunity to practice public speaking, to do committee work, and provide service to a body outside their family. However, in some contemporary churches, factors such as time-efficiency during worship and advances in Christian education that encourage age-appropriate worship, have combined to strike young people from the presence of the general body during the “primetime” 11:00 worship hour. If your congregation has succumbed to the temptation to show only the most popular, poised members, you may be overlooking a prime equipping moment.²¹

VII. Additional Resources

- Dash, Michael I.N. and Christine D. Chapman. The Shape of Zion: Leadership and Life in Black Churches. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2003.
- Hollies, Linda H., Ed. Sage Sisters: Essential Lessons for African American Women in Ministry. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2007.

Notes

1. Mays, Benjamin E. Born to Rebel. New York, NY: Charles Scribner Sons, 1971, p. 1.
2. Ibid., p. 40.
3. Ibid., p. 58.

4. Ibid., p. 137.
5. Ibid., p. 97.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., p. 101.
9. Ibid., p. 139.
10. Ibid., pp. 144-145.
11. Ibid., p. 145.
12. Ibid., pp. 173-177.
13. Ibid., p. 176.
14. Ibid., p. 234.
15. Ibid., pp. 235-237, 240.
16. Ibid., p. 240.
17. Ibid., p. 141.
18. "Great Is Thou Faithfulness." Chisholm, Thomas O. African American Heritage Hymnal. Chicago: GIA Publication, Inc., 2001. #158
19. "Lead Me, Guide Me." Akers, Doris. African American Heritage Hymnal. #474
20. "I Can Do All Things Through Christ." Clark, Elberita. African American Heritage Hymnal. #383. Consider changing the "I"s and "me"s to "we" and "us." This was the inspiring practice of the Cascade United Methodist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, where I worshipped as a member of the congregation in 2005.
21. Dash, Michael I.N. and Christine D. Chapman. The Shape of Zion: Leadership and Life in Black Churches. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2003. pp. 94-99.