

Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership

Ruth Haley Barton

“For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world and forfeit their soul?”
—Jesus

Recently, I made a comment to a friend that surprised us both. In the quietness of listening to each other’s souls, these words slipped out: *I’m tired of helping other people enjoy God; I just want to enjoy God myself.* The statement took us both by surprise because it was full of such longing and unedited truth. It was sobering as well because what I was really saying was that my leadership—which usually comes from a place of deep connection with my own soul—was *at that moment* disconnected from current reality in my own life. It alerted me to the fact that I was slipping into a danger zone and I needed to pay attention.

Such moments come to all of us—moments when our leadership feels like something we “put on” like a piece of clothing pulled out of the closet for a particular occasion. Perhaps you have experienced this dynamic as well. You are preparing to preach and have the sinking realization that you are getting ready to exhort others in values and behaviors that you are not living yourself. You are leading worship and notice that you have to manufacture a display of emotion because there isn’t anything real in your own intimacy with God. Or perhaps someone needs pastoral care and you realize that you *just don’t care*. You rally your energy to go through the motions, but all the while you are aware that your heart is devoid of real compassion.

The spiritual leader pays attention to these inner dynamics rather than merely soldiering on. In fact, spiritual leadership emerges from our willingness to stay connected

with the truth about ourselves and allowing that truth to drive us deeper in our own spiritual search so that we can lead from that place.

The question many leaders are asking is, how do we stay faithful to our commitments while, at the same time, finding ways to nurture our souls? As one pastor put it, “I am increasingly uncertain about how one is supposed to navigate the time commitments of ministry and one’s personal spiritual journey towards wholeness. I find myself wondering if the two aren’t mutually exclusive.”

The discipline of retreat is a powerful practice for leaders because it enables us to pull back from a position of danger in our lives, to rest in God for awhile, and take an honest look at our lives and our leadership. On retreat we give ourselves over to rhythms of prayer, solitude and community in ways that are deeply replenishing, restoring the connection between our soul and our leadership. Through the simple reading of Scripture, silent listening, and spiritual guidance we give God access to ourselves and settle into a place of intimacy with God for our own soul’s sake. On retreat we are rescued from the treadmill of relentless human striving so that we can touch the life and energy of the Spirit moving deep within us. In this set-apart time and place, we listen for the still, small voice of God telling us who we really are so that we are not quite so enslaved by the demands and expectations of life in leadership.

Jesus was very intentional about guiding the disciples into the discipline of retreat early on in their ministry. Mark 6:30 is a familiar verse in which Jesus invites his disciples to “come away to a solitary place all by yourselves and rest awhile” but it is even more compelling when taken in context. At the beginning of Mark 6, we discover that Jesus had just commissioned the disciples for ministry and had given them the

authority to cast out demons, to preach the Gospel and to heal the sick. These were exciting times indeed but also times of great spiritual exertion and emotional complexity for they had also experienced a devastating loss: John the Baptist had been beheaded on the silliest of whims and it had been their job to retrieve the body and bury it. It is hard to imagine the toll that it must have taken on them emotionally to care for the beheaded body of the one who had proclaimed the way of the Lord with such power and grace.

In the midst of all this—the first flush of ministry success and also the grief of deep personal loss—they crowded around Jesus and reported in on all they had done and taught. You can almost hear the kinds of things they might have said: “You can’t believe it! We spoke to a demon that was holding someone in bondage and he left the person!” “We preached the Gospel and called for people to come forward and repent, and they all came forward!” “There was this person who was crippled and we anointed him with oil and he was cured! It’s unbelievable what’s happening out there!”

But Jesus seemed to have little time for their ministry reports. He was much more concerned about the bigger issue of how they would sustain their spiritual life rather than becoming overly distracted by outward successes. Without wasting any time at all, he invited them to retreat so that they could rest and be with him. Like us, they were surrounded by people who had needs and it was no small thing to extricate themselves from the human morass that surrounded them. No sooner had they set their course and gotten into a boat to leave than the crowd saw what they were doing, took off on foot and arrived ahead of them. The solitary place that Jesus was leading them to was no longer very solitary!

But Jesus was undeterred. He had compassion on the crowd because he saw how lost they were spiritually and he *did* lead the disciples in meeting the needs of the crowd. He multiplied not only the meager five loaves and two fishes into a meal for 5000+ guests but also multiplied the disciple's meager energies so that they could stay present and help. But before the miracle was even cleaned up, Jesus was back on task and said to them, "I'll finish up here. You go on ahead to that solitary place because that is still what you need most."

As leaders we might wonder if we have the right to pull away for a spiritual retreat but Jesus' intentionality in establishing a pattern of "retreating" in his life together with the disciples is a pretty decisive indicator that retreat is a most important discipline for spiritual leaders. We might look at our schedule and think we don't have time but then, neither did the disciples. Evidently, the best time to go on a retreat is when you think you don't have time!

The task of the spiritual leader is to stay true to our own spiritual seeking. Those looking to us for spiritual leadership need us to keep searching for the bread of life that feeds our own souls so that we can guide them to places of sustenance for their souls. Then, rather than offering the cold stone of past devotional insights, regurgitated apologetics, or someone else's musings about the spiritual life, we will have bread to offer that is warm from the oven of our own intimacy with God. Our leadership will flow from values that have been forged in the crucible of our spiritual transformation. Our vision will emerge from faithful prayer and deep listening. Our relationships will be enlivened by the love that is poured out in our hearts by the spirit of God.

In the end, strengthening the soul of our leadership is the best thing any of us can do to strengthen the soul of the Church—our own church and the whole Church of Christ until he comes.

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