"Following a Leader"

III John; I John 4:1-6; Matthew 7:15-20

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1st Presbyterian Church of Sharon

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I. Introduction

A Christian couple from Pittsburgh was excited to finally be in Israel. For years they had read and heard about all the towns and cities and rivers and seas and mountains from the Bible. Now they were finally able to see it all themselves, and they were elated. It made everything more real.

One day they were in northern Israel, in the Galilee area, with pastures and farmland on both sides of the road. As they came around a corner they had to stop for a couple shepherds and their sheep. But as the couple watched the shepherds, they were surprised. The shepherds were following the sheep, yelling and cursing at the sheep, and swinging sticks to keep the sheep together and to drive them forward.

Now this was not at all what the couple had expected from shepherds after reading the Bible. So the man rolled down the window of his rental car and yelled to the shepherds, "I thought shepherds were to gently lead their sheep and call them by name." One of the men with a stick called back, "We're not the shepherds. We're the butchers. And we're heading to market."

The story raises the question about our expectations of leadership.

Years ago now some children came forward here for the children's message during worship. One little boy, maybe 5 or 6, was all smiles. I knew him and his family, and knew his mom and dad were in the hospitality business and worked at a couple hotels. As I started to tell a Bible story the little boy enthusiastically raised his hand. When I called on him, he asked in a very clear, loud voice, "Are you the manager here?" Somewhat surprised at the question, I looked to his parents toward the back of the sanctuary. His dad was smiles while his mom had that "I can't believe he said that" look. I then looked at the little boy and responded, "Yes, some days I am the manager here." And the boy was pleased. He had a handle on who I was.

The story also raises the question about our expectations of leadership.

II. Brief Exegesis

III John is one of two genuine personal letters in the New Testament. It's from someone named "the Elder" to a leader in a church named "Gaius." The other personal letter is Paul's letter to Philemon.

The letter itself is from the late 1st C and is part of the theology and writing connected to John the disciple of Jesus. This collection of writing and theology includes the Gospel of John, I, II and III John, and Revelation. "The Elder" seems to have some type of authority in the community of John in the Ephesus area, while "Gaius" may be a leader in a particular church in the Ephesus area.

Most likely the Gospel of John came first and was circulated among churches. Then came I John as a type of "commentary" on John. Then came II and III John as letters about specific matters to specific churches. Revelation then came last.

The situation III John addresses is a growing conflict over church leadership. A leader of a church by the name of "Diotrephes" (Di/o/tre/fees) has failed to recognize the authority of "the Elder." Furthermore, Diotrephes has not extended hospitality to some people who have come from "the Elder." And even more, Diotrephes has threatened to excommunicate from the church anyone who does offer hospitality to anyone connected to "the Elder."

Gaius, on the other hand, who is also a leader in the church with Diotrephes, has welcomed the people from "the Elder." So "the Elder" writes to thank Gaius, and to encourage his stand against Diotrephes.

So, who's in charge in that church? Is it "the Elder?" Or is it Diotrephes? Or is it Gaius? What we may have here is a transition in leadership from the way of the very early church to the way of the more established church. "The Elder" represents church leadership that is older and more primitive. It's an authority based on connection to an original witness, Jesus' disciple John, and spiritual connection, or abiding in Jesus, through radical obedience to the command to love and belief. "The Elder" is old school. Diotrephes represents the emerging way of authority in the church through leadership gifts and recognition in the church. He's new school.

We have no idea who came out on top in this situation. But we do know that as original witnesses to Jesus became 2 and 3 generations removed from Jesus, the way of authority claimed by leaders like "the Elder" became less, and the authority by the power and politics of the church became more, as claimed by Diotrephes.

The leadership conflict between "the Elder" and Diotrephes may at first appear petty. And we may even wonder why this brief letter is even in the Bible. But it raises an important issue that the church has wrestled with for 2000 years; who leads a church? And who leads "the big "C" Church? Who has authority to speak on matters of doctrine and theology, what's true and what's heresy, who's a part of the Christian Church and who's outside. It also raises questions about church organization and how leadership is passed on. It's the questions we ask in our

Christian faith: who's a leader? who can I believe? who should I follow? and "who's the manager here?"

We tend to romanticize the early church. But in truth the very early church was like "the wild west." There were no structures or church government or polity. And there was no history. They were figuring it out as they lived it out. Anyone could come wandering into town, sit in the front pew of a church, claim he or she had authority from God and claim to be a prophet of God. How did you know if that person spoke with authority?

The readings from Matthew 7 and I John 4 are helpful. Matthew 7 says you know leaders by the fruit they produce in their lives. It's not about what anyone says or claims, but about how they live. What do you see? Is that person becoming more like Jesus?

And I John 4 says theology matters. Christian church leaders are a part of a theological tradition. They believe and share what has been handed on to them. In the situation in churches in and around Ephesus, it mattered that the Christian churches affirmed that Jesus Christ came in the flesh, so that he really lived, died on a cross, and rose again. He was not just a spirit. Rather God was somehow incarnate in Jesus. But Jesus was also a real person. And to speak with authority and be a leader you needed to be part of that theological tradition.

There are certainly additional ways to test church leadership, but these two are important. Does the person live the faith? Does the fruit in his or her life look like the way of Jesus? And do they believe and share in a theological tradition? In Presbyterian churches it matters that pastors and elders are part of the Presbyterian theological tradition. I can tell you lots of problems come up when that leader is not.

III. Brief Theological Reflection

So what about church leadership and authority? Or more specifically, what about Presbyterian Church leadership and authority in the 21st C?

A number of years ago I discovered the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra. I had heard something they played on the radio so I looked them up online.

The Orpheus Chamber Orchestra was founded in 1972. They call NYC home, but travel extensively nationally and internationally. As a "chamber orchestra" there are 30 core musicians. Over the years they have recorded 71 albums, won some Grammys and produced 42 original works.

But beyond being very good musicians and a very good chamber orchestra, they have never had a conductor. From the very beginning they have decided to go a different way. Rather than being led by a conductor they chose a different way of leadership. The musicians share leadership. The way it works is that the section leaders, such as the strings and wood winds, get together and discuss how they want to perform a symphony. Then each section leader gets together with his or her section, discusses how they want to perform the symphony and practices.

Then they bring the whole orchestra together, perform the symphony as discussed, and discuss it further as a whole orchestra. This type of leadership values all the members of the orchestra. It values humility and openness and communication. And it expects the musicians to be skilled and prepared so to share leadership. And for over 50 years it has worked well.

Even more, the Harvard Business School, one of the top business schools in the country, works with the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra as a model for a different type of organizational leadership. Rather than the typical "top-down" corporate model, students working on their MBAs at Harvard can come and study a "flatter" more egalitarian way of leadership. And that style of leadership is finding its way into more businesses today. It's also how our Presbytery, Shenango Presbytery, is now organized.

The Orpheus Chamber Orchestra. And leadership without a conductor. In many ways that is the Presbyterian way of leadership. Our ancient Scottish Presbyterian ancestors were concerned about church leaders with too much power. They had seen what happens when kings and popes and bishops have all the authority and lead. And they had fought wars when that power was abused. So in the Presbyterian Church, this Presbyterian Church, leadership and authority is shared. It's shared between pastor and elders. It's shared between staff. It's shared between teams and groups and members.

So what matters in this "Orpheus Chamber Orchestra" style of church leadership? Fruit matters. The Christian way of life matters. Those whose way of life moves in the direction of Jesus' way of life earn the trust and respect for church leadership. And being part of a theological tradition matters. Specifically, a Presbyterian theological tradition. And from that tradition comes discussions and wisdom on being a faithful and fruitful Presbyterian church. And like Orpheus humility, openness, and responsibility matter.

Some days I do feel like a type of "church manager." And that's OK. It's what is needed. But in truth we are like the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra and disciples of Jesus Christ following the Great Shepherd together, who gently leads us and calls us by name. And together we share leadership.