KNOWING WHERE YOU BELONG

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I do leadership training and consulting. I've been doing it for the past 23 years and I have met a lot of leaders. My goal is to make all of them better because we need competent, wise, courageous leaders. My special niche is to train young leaders, the folks who haven't been at it very long. You see, when you promote people and then don't teach them how to lead, they often don't end up as competent, wise and courageous leaders.

There are a number of critical things you need to learn when you become a leader – some of the learning involves skills, but most of it has more to do with mindset, how you think about the new work you have been asked to do.

One of those mindset things is about identity. Now that you have a new title, who are you, where do you belong? Figuring that out sounds easier than it is. You see, when you have been an individual contributor for 7 years and then on Tuesday they promote you, you don't wake up on Wednesday feeling any different. Which means that you may have the title and the hassles of a manager, but

you may not ever act like a leader unless you learn to identify as one.

I show them this graphic to explain. The red triangle represents all the leaders in the organization, everyone above this young manager. The gray triangle represents the team they now lead, often the team they have been part of, made up of their friends and former peers. And the blue triangle is this new leader.

I say to them, if you want to be good, if you want to be effective, it's really important that you are clear about where you belong. Your work identity should be this. You are still connected to the grey triangle. You lead them and develop them and get work done through them. But you now belong in the red triangle. It is the red triangle, the other managers and leaders all over the organization, who are now your peers, your confidants, your supports. You connect the grey triangle to the red one, but you belong to the team of leaders.

Many of the mediocre leaders I have met over the years are mediocre, in part, because they never made that shift in their identity. They spend years thinking they still belong where they came from.

God didn't exactly promote Abraham, but sort of. Abram was actually his name. He had grown up in Ur, a bustling port city in Mesopotamia about 200

miles south of modern day Bagdad. Then, after marriage, along with all of his kin, Abram's father moved the whole clan to Haran, another bustling city, the center of trade routes in what is now southern Turkey. He and all of his ancestors were polytheists, meaning that they worshipped many gods, primarily Sin, the Moon God. At the age of 75, after most people in his time were already dead, this old, non-Jew, hears the voice of the Hebrew God telling him to leave the city, his kinfolk, the religion that he knew and to go out to a place that he does not know.

12 The LORD had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

I lived in Henrico County for 40 years. When I moved 22 miles away into Chesterfield County a few years ago, I was ambivalent about leaving. I cannot imagine leaving everything behind to travel about 400 miles away, on foot, to a place that I had never seen and that was yet to be disclosed to me. How did he do it? How did he just up and go?

Well, the writer of Hebrews says that he did it because he knew where he belonged. Abraham and Sarah came to realize that they were foreigners and strangers – not immigrant Haranites living among Canaanites – but rather foreigners and

strangers on earth. The writer says people like them "…show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were looking for a better country, a heavenly one."

A central concept for the Church of the Brethren is that we are "in the world but not of the world." As a dorky, nerdy, goodie-two-shoes church kid I figured that meant I would not and should not ever feel like I belonged in society, that I would always be on the outside looking in. And for a while, that was sort of true. But that didn't last and that's not what we mean anyway.

The slippery slope for followers of Jesus is that we DO fit into the world. We fit in just fine. The vast majority of the Brethren had given up the practice of wearing plain clothes by the end of the 1920s, so we are in no outward way distinguishable from anyone else. We never really chose to live as the Amish do, removed from the practices of the world as much as possible. (Although this spring I did chuckle when in Lancaster County I witnessed an Amish family in a horse drawn cart, driving out of the Costco parking lot.)

Our being "in the world but not of the world" is not about separation. The other week in her sermon Nancy Sollenberger Heishman quoted a phrase I

had never heard, which is that “Some Christians are so heavenly minded that they are of no earthly good.” I am reiterating her point. To be in the world means that we ARE to be of earthly good.

To not be OF the world has to do with identify. Our identity is to be similar to that of the leaders I teach – fully part of the red triangle – the Kingdom of God, a place where justice and peace reign, where all are welcome and nurtured and loved for who they are because they are in the image of God. We are strangers here in the grey triangle – this is not our permanent home. But while we are here, it is our calling to link the grey triangle – everyone living around us -- neighbors, friends, enemies, coworkers, strangers, immigrants, people we don’t understand, people we don’t like, people we don’t agree with – it is our calling to be their link to God’s Kingdom of justice and peace.

In 1965, at the end of the walk from Selma to Montgomery, Martin Luther King Jr. first used the phrase, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice". It might. Be it sure is slow and best I can tell, it is 3 steps forward and at least 2 or 3 steps back – over and over again.

Ken Heatwole reminded us in his remarks throughout last Sunday that patience is necessary for progress. I found myself thinking as I listened to

him that I wish I had his temperament. Ken is a steady, patient person by nature. He has a lot more tolerance for the fits and starts of the church than I do.

I want to declare that when we are talking about the same thing 40 years later, we are not making progress! I want to advocate for splitting up the way we really need to – no hangers on. If you are in for welcoming LBGTQ folks, great. If you not for that, fine. Let's just be honest about where we are and go our separate ways. Maybe that's not wise. Maybe that's me not being willing to do my job to link the grey triangle to the red one. But boy I am tired of justice coming so slowly.

The part of what Ken said that I could really resonate with is that patience is active. In 2022, Ohio Congresswoman Shontel Brown spoke to this point. She said, “Like many of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous quotations, these words echo through the ages. They offer hope and give rise to a sense that progress toward freedom, equality, and—indeed—justice is inevitable.

But the arc of the moral universe is anything but. It does not bend towards justice on its own—no, it only does so because people pull it towards justice. It is an active exercise, not a passive one.

No one knew this better than Dr. King. His famous words are divorced of their broader context. Before delivering this famous line in his sermon at the Temple Israel, Dr. King acknowledged to reach the promised land, some people might get “scarred up” or even face death. “

“All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting they were foreigners and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had the opportunity to return.”

How do we keep ourselves aligned with these giants of faith? How do we keep looking for a better country knowing that is where we belong? How do we keep pulling toward God’s Kingdom amidst a world that is seemingly being driven to a place that is quite the opposite?

The short passage from today’s lections in Luke 12 offers a suggestion. In Chapter 12 Luke admonishes his readers to keep focused on what is important. He advises them to sell their possessions because “where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”

We must pay attention to where our heart is. What matters to you? What do you value most? Where your treasure is, that's where your heart is.

Here's the related thing: Where your heart is, that's where your vision will be. What you will notice, how you will spend your energy, what will drive your behavior – will have everything to do with where your heart is. What we value, and prioritize shows up in the way we live and interact with the world. Where our focus is, where our eyes are set, we drive in that direction.

If we are angered by injustice, if our hearts ache for those who are mistreated, if we are sleepless after watching the news of violence and hunger, if we are longing for a "better country" as Hebrews says – we are looking in the right direction. It is a painful place to be, but it is the right place. We can be patient, but we must take a stand. We can be humble, but we must confidently declare our righteous indignation on behalf of others. We can be known for justice and peace but we must do whatever we can to stop all that is not. We are the link to God's Kingdom and we cannot hold back.

Christianity is not about who is on our team and who is not. It is about following the example of Jesus. It's about being clear about where we belong. We belong to a better country and we are walking in faith toward it. It is about knowing that we

are in this world AND we must be constantly pointing to the world we are truly **of.**

“If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had the opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country – a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.” (Hebrews 11:15-16)

I hope that as we find our way as a congregation that we will be bold. That we will come to see that this is our moment, to leave what has been and go out confidently to a place we do not yet fully know, but is on the way to the city that God has prepared.