

# Leadership and Followership

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



*"Baptism of the Lord" mosaic, Resurrection Cemetery, Affton, Missouri*

## Introduction to the Service

Before we officially start our service, I want you all to get to know me a little better. Bear with me.

Within the last year, a few new things have happened in my life. I not only became a dog owner for the first time, but also a first-time truck owner. A few weeks ago, I shared with you about a bumper sticker on my car. Well, I want to share about the three bumper stickers on my 2003 Toyota Tundra.



**My first bumper sticker is this: The American Flag.** It's got the Blue Stripe in honor of the Police, and the Green Stripe in honor of the Military, and the Red Stripe in honor of the Fire Department. I appreciate their support, their services, and the risks they take. I want others to know it.



**My second bumper sticker is this: BLM—Black Lives Matter.** It says, “I see you, I hear you, I stand with you.” I believe that God has created all of us in his image. And that we’re to treat every human being—no matter their skin-tone, with respect and dignity. To me, how we police and treat people of color is a spiritual matter, not merely a political one. I think I might be the only car in the States that has these two bumper stickers on the same car.



**My third bumper sticker—which is between the other two—says “Come Together.”** Come Together. Not tear each other down. Come Together. Talk, listen, and learn from one another—cops and protestors, Republicans and Democrats, liberals and conservatives, Biden voters and Trump voters. Get to know each other. Don’t lob bombs or accusations at each other! We can celebrate who we are and we can be humble enough to learn new things from others and to be honest that all of us have room to grow—that we get it wrong from time to time. There’s no need to be hostile to one another.

My calling, my task as a pastor, is to celebrate AND challenge. To focus on the BRIGHT SPOTS and own up to the DARK SIDE. We all have both in varying degrees—as individuals and as a nation—Pastors included. I believe we can walk AND chew gum at the same time. We can be who we are AND we can be more, be better. To be honest, I don’t care if you’re Democrat or Republican, but I do care what kind of Democrat or Republican you are. I care that you’re a Jesus-follower. You’ve got the freedom to disagree with what I say. Just think about and pray about what I share.

So in today’s service, we’re going to grapple with a lot of things: \*the mob rioting on Capitol Hill, \*a pandemic where Arizona is the world’s COVID hot spot; we’re going to talk about \*stewardship and the spirituality of giving to the church in 2021, even in the middle of economic uncertainty. We have to. So, let’s do life and faith together courageously, honestly, and humbly, Immanuel. Can I get an AMEN?

## Prayer for the Nation

*Let's now pray for our nation.*

O Lord, hear our prayer: Dismay. Shock. Lament. *How did it come to this?* Almighty God, we confess the sins of the worst parts of our history and our present. We ask that your Holy Spirit guide us toward a deep repentance. We confess that too often we've relied upon temporal promises which come and go with every news cycle. Instead, help us to rely upon Jesus. Jesus, who calls us to love. Jesus, who offers grace. Jesus, who offers mercy. We remember your promises of restoration and covenant and we call upon them now. We pray that the Holy Spirit will bring a newfound peace to our land. A surprising peace and a deeply needed one. Peace to heal wounds. We remember the warnings of Jesus about violence begetting violence. Save us from further acts of political and racial violence. Save us from mistrust, chaos, and injustice. May the coming days be ruled by truth, goodness, and integrity. From sea to shining sea, from small town streets to the halls of power, help each and every one of us to walk in the manner of Jesus Christ. We offer this prayer in Jesus' name. Amen.

## Prayer of Illumination

Lord God, your Word is a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Shine forth your light, illuminating our darkness and the world's darkness, so that we, prodigal sons and daughters, might run into your open arms once again. Amen.

## SERMON – Leadership and Followership

Wasn't 2021 supposed to get better? I mean, we're only a week and a half into the new year, right? Pastor to the Presbytery Brad Munroe gave us a good reminder last Sunday—be careful what you wish for in a new year.

The real task before us in 2021, or really any year, is to think about what kind of people, what kind of church, what kind of nation we want to be. Not only that, but how will we move forward through an unfolding national crisis or our personal trials and tribulations. I mean we've seen some harrowing things this last week. Let's name them:

- Accusations of election fraud.
- The court cases surrounding them.
- All the courts ruling against or rejecting the accusations.
- The interruption of electoral college votes and their eventual certification.
- The American flag taken down on Capitol Hill and replaced with a very different flag.
- We saw large signs saying "Jesus 2020" as if Jesus himself had the election stolen from him.
- A confederate flag marched through the halls of Congress.
- Senators and Representatives lying on the floor, fearing for their lives.
- Blood shed and lives lost—one of them being Officer Brian Sicknick at the Capitol.
- Trump banned from Twitter. There's now talk of removal from office—and who knows what else will happen between the time this sermon is preached and you watch it on YouTube.

And we know there have been lots of protests going on about racial injustice throughout much of 2020. Many peaceful, but as we know, there also has been destruction of property and violence. That too is unacceptable. Let's keep walking AND chewing our gum—respect AND reform. This is the soul of our nation we're talking about. The soul of the American church is at stake. All of this begs us to ask: Who are we really following? How are we following? And how are we leading?

I believe we're in the midst of not only a leadership crisis, but a followership crisis. So what is the Spirit saying to the church? I believe it's found in today's Lectionary reading on this Baptism of the Lord Sunday. In the Gospel according to Mark, chapter one, verses four through eleven.

Our Gospel reading is a message about how to lead and how to follow in a godly and upright manner. It's a message about repentance. Humility. Honor. A message about the healthy and holy transfer of power—from John the Baptist to Jesus. At the end of the day—it's a message about Jesus. Even when the passage talks about John the Baptist, it's still about Jesus because John always points to Jesus: "Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight!"

*So let's hear now the Word of the Lord to us from the Gospel of Mark:*

Mark 1:4-11 (NRSV)

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

***The grass withers and the flower fades,  
but the Word of God endures forever.  
Thanks be to God.***

If you remember, during Advent we talked about the baby Jesus and the baby John the Baptist. Well, they're all grown up now, several decades later. First, John appears in his wilderness attire: clad with a camel hair cloak and leather belt accessory, a lone voice crying out in the wilderness. There's a reason Mark mentions John's fashion tastes: John is dressed exactly like the Old Testament prophet Elijah. In fact, the fourth gospel says John is the greatest of the prophets. And he's no city slicker. He's the real deal.



The dude is not messing around. He eats from the land—locusts (the only kosher insect) dipped in wild honey mustard—ummmm um!

Today, John would have a wilderness survival show on the Discovery Channel. And his message?

**Repent! Change your thinking!  
Confess your sins! Be baptized!**

This lone voice is not only for then, it's for now. So what do we repent of? Human arrogance, foolishness, or as the Bible describes it—

**Missing the mark.  
Falling short of God's glory.  
Or just plain old-fashioned sin.**

America repent!—Thugs and anarchists, repent!—Democrats repent!—Republicans repent!—Independents—you're doing okay... *just kidding!* You repent too!—John Tittle repent!

Let's all humble ourselves and repent. Let us turn and learn.

I'm not talking about hellfire and brimstone here. Repentance is an invitation, it's an opportunity, to receive heaven-light, to cease casting stones. Repent. More bringing down a little bit of heaven onto earth is what John the Baptist is talking about, rather than raising hell up to earth. And let's be honest—we all have varying degrees of sin—every single one of us. No one is without sin. And we all must face the varying consequences for the wrong-doing that we've done, whether we're a peasant, a president, or a dissident. And no matter who you are, receive Christ's forgiveness and a new start. Have your mind changed to the mind of Christ.

You see, repentance is the way to prepare the way of the Lord in our lives. It clears out the clutter and the obstacles. Make way for the Coming One and his kingdom in our hearts. So we read in our passage that the crowds were following John the Baptist and they were being baptized by him, in the river Jordan. Lots of them in fact. We don't know if there were 250,000, but there were a lot. And then John the Baptist had a surprising message for his followers: "After me one is coming who is more powerful than me." A lone hand was raised in the crowd. "Uhhh, John the Baptist, um, did I hear you right—someone else?" Yes. Not you? No. Not me. Someone more powerful than you? Yes. But John, we're your disciples, surely he's not as powerful as you?" Yes, he is the Coming One, the Messiah. He's mightier than me, stronger than me. You see, John the Baptist was a strong leader. But more importantly, he was a strong follower. Strong leadership and strong followership go hand in



hand with one another. In fact, Aristotle once said this: you have to first learn how to follow well, before you can lead well. John the Baptist reversed it. He first led well, now he was going to follow well. That's not easy to do. That's incredibly hard to do. To serve after you've been leading. John the Baptist knew all along that it was about Jesus, not him. First and foremost, he was not a leader, he was a follower. John wasn't the one and only, the end all and be all. He knew that there was something special and different about Jesus. It wasn't that Jesus had political power or that he had military authority. He was anointed by the Spirit, he was the Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world. Jesus came for the purpose of healing. He was anointed to teach, to perform miracles, to die for our sins, and to rise from the dead. To baptize with the Spirit, to usher in the Kingdom of Heaven. You see, this was a watershed moment for John the Baptist and for Jesus at the Jordan River. It was a watershed moment for the world, for us today.

Bible scholars have shown that Jesus' baptism was a coronation, a consecration, a commissioning, even an inauguration for his public ministry that was about to begin. In other words, John the Baptist knew Jesus' baptism was the Messiah's inauguration and not his. John was tapped into his role, his purpose, his calling, his place to prepare the way, not for himself, but for the Lord. In fact, some of John the Baptist's disciples switched leaders. They stopped following John the Baptist and they started following Jesus the Messiah. Several became part of the twelve disciples of Jesus. And John was okay with that. "He must increase and I must decrease" said John the Baptist. In other words, he gave his followers permission—it's okay for you stop following me and to start following another. In fact, I want you to follow him. If your leader isn't Jesus, then your leader is not a forever leader. We are forever followers of only one person and that is Jesus—no mere human being. We are forever followers of only Jesus. Only Jesus is our forever leader. Humans are our secondary, temporary leaders. Yes, they are leaders and we need to show honor to them, but it's temporary.

The crowds kept coming to John and what did John do? He kept redirecting them, not to himself, but to Jesus. John the Baptist knew it was time to let go. To recede as Jesus accedes. Strong followership, strong leadership knows the seasons and the times. As the Preacher says in Ecclesiastes:

"To everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven."

The Scriptures speak to the importance of these seasons, the importance of beginnings and the importance of endings in our lives. Just as we concluded an old year, we now begin a new year. We said good-bye to outgoing elders and deacons who finished their terms. We said hello to our new elders and deacons. Thirteen years ago this very month of January, You and I said hello to one another in 2008. When it's time for me to retire or if God is to call me elsewhere, I will go. It's not now. But someday, it will end. And that's okay too. It's natural, it's good, it's normal, it's healthy. It's not forever, but let's enjoy the ride. But when our stop comes, and it will, and we hear the whistle blow—you get off. You see leadership and followership are about boundaries. Knowing yourself. Knowing your limits. Knowing others. Knowing God. Knowing that you're not God. That there are limitations in life. Wisdom understands this—kind of like the sons of Issachar in the Hebrew scriptures who, the Bible says, understood the times with knowledge of what Israel should do. It's the wisdom of knowing not only your strengths but your shadows. Knowing where you begin and where you end—what is yours and what is another's. And listening to others and to your surroundings. Someday, guaranteed, you will die. I will die. We don't go on forever. We're mortals, or as the Scriptures put it: "Verily every man at his best state is altogether vanity." Human life passes as a

shadow, a mere breath. And in another passage: "We brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we bring nothing out." The message? We aren't God. God is God. From dust we came, and to dust we'll return—everybody. The good news is that in Christ Jesus, our last breath on earth will be our first breath in heaven. The gift of eternal life is ever new, it's ever fresh—it never ends. And so we can relax, we can trust, we can breathe deep the breath of God here on earth. Because we know, even in hard times, we're going to be OK. Let be. Presidents come and Presidents go. We win some and we lose some, and then we look forward to the next season. As the loveable loser Cub fans used to say, "Well maybe next year." Even that time came. Miracle of miracles, the Cubs won the World Series!

But Jesus? He's different. The book of Hebrews says He's the same "yesterday, today, and forever." Jesus is our forever leader who is always by our side, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." Good followership and leadership, they involve humility. Jesus humbled himself by being baptized. He didn't need to—he was sinless. But he wanted to entirely identify with us through his baptism. John the Baptist humbled himself by saying: I'm not fit to kneel down and undo the strap of his sandals. I baptize with water, but he, the Holy One, will baptize with the Holy Spirit. John obeyed Jesus' request and he baptized Jesus. So as the Spirit came down from heaven, Jesus came up from the water. As Jesus broke through the surface of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and a dove dart down. Both water and sky rent asunder—out of the blue. The same word "torn apart" that Mark uses, was used for the curtain in the Holy of Holies was ripped in half when Jesus gave up his spirit on the cross. It was a divine breakthrough. It was a redemptive ripping. This redemptive ripping allowed God to break into the scene, the divine breakthrough.



And then, right there in the Jordan River, the Spirit, like a dove, descended upon Jesus. And a voice thundered from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved and in you I am well pleased." "In you I take great delight." God was affirming Jesus with his voice, and God was affirming Jesus with the visual presence of the Dove, both sight and sound. My Son I love you! I'm proud of you! You're doing exactly what you've been sent to do—to lead and to serve. To die and to give your life as a ransom for many. I've got your back, My Son. The power of words, life-giving words. Words that build up and not destroy. You see, sometimes the Holy Spirit affirms us, but other times the Spirit disciplines us. We read in the next verse, Mark 1:12, very surprising words of what happens next. Shocking words. "And the Spirit immediately drove Jesus into the wilderness" to be tempted for forty days. What? Part of leadership is being tested. It's denying yourself and relying upon the Holy Spirit. It's self-sacrifice,

being pushed to the limit and stretched. But in the midst of the hunger, in the midst of the loneliness, the desert, and the wild animals those forty days, we read that the angels waited upon Jesus in the wild. In the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus resisted the Evil One's temptations, rather than selling his soul to the devil. Jesus passed the test. He was faithful to his Father. Jesus' public ministry was ready to commence.

Hear the good news Immanuel: By the kindness of God, in our baptism we are adopted into the forever family of God. Jesus is our older brother. We're sons and daughters of God Almighty. And we are brothers and sisters in Christ. We take on the family likeness—we're chips off the ol' block. The Spirit rests upon us, anointing us, like Jesus, to bring healing. To lead by following. And then, like John the Baptist, to point others not to ourselves, but we point others back to Jesus. Prepare ye the way of the Lord! Make straight HIS paths, NOT our paths. Jesus' path—the path of the One who is the way, the truth, and the life. Amen.

Sermon Art: "Baptism of the Lord" mosaic, Resurrection Cemetery, Affton, Missouri. One of the last commissions of the famed Ravenna Mosaic Company, circa 1974.

---

The New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.