

Friday Focus

From Emory

The Character-Based Leader (an article by Gordan MacDonald)

From last time:

Cheerful! Helpful! Firm! Such an interesting string of words. Years ago I typed them into the screen saver of my computer. I see them almost daily, and they remind me of the kind of men and women I most admire. And each time they revive my aspirations to be a person marked by those qualities.

Musing on those three words one day, I wrote in my journal that I desired to be

not a pessimistic man, but a cheerful one;

not a discouraging man, but a helpful one;

not an unbending man, but a firm one.

I think Jesus would smile at the thought of His disciples--then and now--who are cheerful, helpful and firm. And I suspect that a lot of things might change for the good if there were a larger band of people today who fit that three-word description.

...Often in the Bible, God speaks through leaders, angels, even Jesus Himself; and His recurring greeting is “be not afraid” or “be of good cheer.” They are phrases not to be ignored. They are meant to confront and extinguish the fear and gloom in which most people live daily. What most often followed such words was some kind of a promise of hope that lifted people and offered them redemption and new life. Great leaders do this. They cut through the pain or the boredom of peoples’ lives and announce a new way, a fresh possibility.

...Matthew Arnold said a second thing about his father. “Thou wert...helpful.” I hear this poet speaking of leaders who throw all their energies into the growth of the people around them. Thomas Arnold must have poured a great sense of value into people. He must have found ways to challenge people to think innovatively and creatively. He must have been a man who encouraged people to deal honestly with their mistakes and learn from them. Of Thomas, Matthew Arnold said this:

I believe that there lived
Others like thee in the past,
Not like the men of the crowd
Who all around me to-day
Bluster or cringe, and make life
Hideous, and arid, and vile;
But souls temper’d with fire,
Fervent, heroic, and good,
Helpers and friends of mankind.

Servants of God!

In these recent days we have seen so-called leaders whose philosophy amounts to little more than “it’s all about me.” The man about whom Matthew Arnold wrote was anything but that. In Thomas Arnold’s circle of influence, people enlarged their capabilities and found their own call to service.

...I love Matthew Arnold’s third comment about his father. “Thou wert...firm.” Firm! Does this mean rigid, hard, unbending? Not Thomas Arnold. How about *firm* as meaning principled, disciplined, focused? This seems more like the man of whom Matthew speaks.

Who can be firm in a world where decisions are made in response to the polls and popular opinion? Who can be firm, who can keep his head, to borrow from Kipling, when all about him are losing theirs and blaming it on him? Who can be firm in the face of bitter criticism and gossip? Even in the world of those claiming Christian faith, it is sometimes difficult to be firm in stormy moments. Temptations to bend and not be firm rise when a donor threatens to withhold a promised gift, when pressure is brought to bear by a complaining constituency, when resources are limited and tough, when unpopular decisions have to be made.

I saw firmness in the ways of a journalism professor when as a student I handed in a piece of writing that fell far below the level of quality he expected of me. When the paper was returned with his comments, he appended a final sentence. "You should be ashamed to attach your name to this writing." It was a harsh rebuke, and it stung for a long time. Many years later he apologized for the comment. But what he didn't understand was that it was exactly what I needed to pursue a higher level of writing excellence. My professor's firmness made me a writer.

...As the new school year begins, teachers and administrators must remind themselves that they are in the business of developing a generation from which will come those who, in the tomorrows, will shape the thought, policy, and direction of our society. And who will this generation listen to when it comes to growing the character of a leader? Only to men and women such as Matthew Arnold once described when he thought of his father: prophetic men and women of God who--because the Spirit of His Son is with them--are cheerful, helpful, and firm.

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If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you;
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too:
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or, being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or being hated don't give way to hating,
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise;

If you can dream - and not make dreams your master;
If you can think - and not make thoughts your aim,
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two impostors just the same:
If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools;

If you can make one heap of all your winnings
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings,
And never breathe a word about your loss:
If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
Except the Will which says to them: "Hold on!"

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with Kings - nor lose the common touch,
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
If all men count with you, but none too much:
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And - which is more - you'll be a Man, my son!

Rudyard Kipling