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## **Loyalty**

**Text:** II Samuel 1:1, 17-27

There is no debate or any question about it. David was Israel's greatest king. This was so evidently the case that in the Old Testament that he is not only a king but second only to Moses as a religious figure which is high praise, indeed. In the church, Christ is appropriately described as "great David's greater son." David transcends his time and place. David defines what it means to be a great leader.

That was not easy to accomplish. Kings of his time and region, even kings of Israel and Judah, were Oriental despots, who saw themselves as the embodiment of the people. Thus the people were to serve them, and not they the people. It was for this reason that the prophet Samuel, when the people clamored for a king, warned them that a king would tax them for his own palace, and make their daughters his serving maids, and their sons his charioteers and soldiers and laborers.

But David was different. He was beloved by the people. Whereas many other kings were a great burden to the people, he was not. He was a charismatic figure, and the people loved what he did. He lifted their hearts. He was a hero. He accepted the challenge of the Philistine giant, Goliath, and defended Israel. That victory alone would have left an eternal marker in the minds of the people. But it didn't stop there. His victories over the Philistines, even while a young man fighting under Saul, Israel's first king, endeared him to the Israelites. They developed a chant: "Saul has slain his thousands, but David his tens of thousands." Needless to say, it wasn't a chant that Saul was fond of. Later on, after David became king, his victories gave Israel a minor empire that seemed like the high fulfillment of what God had meant in giving them a promised

land.

Yet, important as the heroism was, important as the charismatic leadership was, what made David great above all in the eyes of his people, was his loyalty. His victories did not only come as a high *commander*. Especially in the early days, David fought side by side with his men, and endured the hardships of the campaign just as they did. As king, he was loyal to his son even when his son rebelled against him with an army. He was above all loyal to the God who pulled him from the pasture to be the shepherd of God's people. This loyalty is something that mere charisma never reaches, and which makes charismatic leadership ultimately not so very important. Why? Well, as the great diplomat and UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjold once said in pondering great and peaceful leadership, to be such a leader, these things have to be true of you: "The other's 'face' is more important than your own. If, while pleading another's cause, you are at the same time seeking something for yourself, you cannot hope to succeed." David saw his people's face, he saw his God's face, as more important than his own.

This loyalty is something that is clearly evidenced by David's words and actions as they are recorded in this morning's Old Testament lesson. Saul has just been killed in battle; so, too, has his son, David's best friend. Now, that might have been good news for David. Certainly, many of his own people thought it was. After all, once God had turned away from Saul as king, and made David his new choice to be king, Saul in a jealous rage had hunted David down and sought to kill him. Thus the death of Saul not only meant safety for David, but his ascension to the throne. The path to the throne was especially clear since his Saul's son Jonathan, who would normally have succeeded him was also killed. But does David rejoice? Not at all. He grieves. He grieves above all for Jonathan, his best friend, of whom he says, "your love to me was wonderful..." But he grieves for Saul, too, who, he says, "clothed Israel in crimson and with

ornaments of gold.” Saul, even though Saul hated him, was to David, what he was because of God’s choice, and David therefore refused ever to raise his hand against him. And thus he in the moment of what could have been his own triumph, grieves, and truly laments over how the mighty have fallen.

David’s leadership, rooted in his loyalty and faithfulness to others, is what might be called moral leadership. That sort of leadership is the best sort of leadership. But let us understand exactly what that means. “Moral leadership” does not mean simply that here is a charismatic leader who is actually moral, rare as such a person is. True enough, the problem with most charismatic leaders is that they start to believe their own PR, and fall in love with themselves more deeply than their followers have. It is far better that they also be unwaveringly moral and solid. But still it is more than just being moral.

No, true moral leadership, especially among God’s people, is always more than charisma, more than the ability to impress others, more even than competency, even while walking the straight and narrow. It is, rather, the ability to lead by standing alongside others, even to your own hurt. It is loyalty and faithfulness. It is the loyalty that is faithfulness to others, even as God is faithful to us. It is the ability to be a friend even when a friend is wrong and yet to still keep intact within oneself the knowledge of the difference between right and wrong. How else can you be of genuine service to your friend? It is the ability to give honor to others before you take honor for yourself, and to give it because it is due.

Loyalty is a virtue that is too little appreciated today, and far too uncultivated. At least the loyalty that does good to human life is. But perhaps there are good reasons why people of discernment do not value loyalty highly and consider it a false virtue. Loyalty has been sorely abused and probably always has been. Loyalty can easily be narrowness and partisanship. There

actually is loyalty in politics, but as we can see only too well in our present politics, that can breed a certain kind of obduracy and viciousness. Loyalty can also be something that hides the truth, and be a petri dish for breeding the dishonorable. With respect to our loyalty to country, we can see this in the truth of Samuel Johnson's timeless remark, that "patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel." We can see this unfortunate loyalty, too, in the present fact that in U.S. high schools and colleges something like seventy per cent or more of the students cheat at some point or another, but even among those who don't and who are offended by it, an even higher percentage would never report cheating by somebody else because it would be "ratting them out." We can see it also in the fact that in cultures where loyalty to family and tribe are high virtues, that there is also a high level of violence. Gangs, and their near imitation in college fraternities and sororities, demand loyalty above all. And we can see an unfortunate loyalty in the fact that often for one to demand loyalty from friend is to put the friend under the onus of never telling you the truth.

So, for all these reasons, loyalty can be considered a false virtue. So how was David's loyalty and faithfulness different? What does his moral leadership, rooted in loyalty and faithfulness, have to teach us about loyalty, and about leadership?

I think that a good part of the problem with loyalty is that the objects of our loyalty can compete – it is, for example, pretty difficult to be loyal to two friends who are themselves sworn enemies. The problem is that they are on the same level, and because they are on the same level, one usually has to choose between them. You can't have both at the same time. But David's loyalty did not begin in causes, or allies or friends that could compete. David's first loyalty was to the God who chose him to lead. His first loyalty was to the one who is the truth, and the one who is merciful, and the one who is the source of the good and of the right. And loyalty to that

One does not compete with any other loyalty other than the false and the selfish and the dishonorable. It was *therefore* because David was loyal and faithful to God, that David could be loyal to God's people. He could see them as created by God, and as having a destiny and calling that God gave them. And, because all his loyalties flowed from *that* deep faithfulness, he was able to not be divided by his other loyalties. That is why the people under David did not have to choose between being loyal to David as king and being loyal to God, as they often had to with other kings, usually with disastrous results.

This is also why David could be a friend *and* tell the truth. It was why when he was in trouble he could accept the truth about himself. It was because he knew that his life was in God's life, that he could value the face of others more than his own, and that he could set aside his own agenda to hear the needs of others. He didn't need others to affirm his own worth and so he could pay attention to them, instead of using them. That was why he was such a good shepherd and could put the welfare of the sheep ahead of his own. That was why he could stand beside his people, and lead them not by pulling them from the front, nor pushing them from the rear, but by walking with them. He could do all that because God walked with him and he walked with God.

Now, in an election year, where each candidate puts himself forward as a man of the people and a man of God, all this may be important. I am not so sure how helpful it is in that case, though. If patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel, in American patriotism, sometimes the worst scoundrels are the ones who take refuge in a muddled blend of patriotism and religion. I will thus leave it for others to sort out, at least for the moment.

What is important, and what I do want you to think about, though, a matter for you as members of Christ's church, and especially as members of a church who will over the next several months be choosing an installed pastor. It will be important during this time to take the

virtues of loyalty and faithfulness to heart in thinking about what a good leader is. It is important to look to figures such as David to determine what really constitutes leadership among God's people.

For it may be impressive to have a charismatic leader as your pastor; all the other churches will admire you, and such a leader will by word and deed bring you along by excitement. Which is, of course, exciting. But, as many, many churches, including this one, know far too well, having learned it in the breach, that charisma has to be within the bounds of some moral strictures. Too often, those charismatic heroes who have slain their thousands start thinking that they are the exception in the human race. But even that is not enough. Moral leadership has to go beyond even those moral strictures that keep personality in line – or rather, not “go beyond.” There has to be something utterly basic, something utterly first, about a good leader that will always be there through thick and thin. And that needs above all to be a sense of faithfulness. It is first a matter of faithfulness and loyalty to the God who created and sustains this people. It has to be somebody who has actual spiritual experience and maturity and who can teach it to a congregation that has said in its recent mission study that it needs to grow more spiritually. And then, after and alongside that sense of faithfulness to God, a good leader needs to have a sense of loyalty and faithfulness to the church and its people. It has to be somebody who, as Hammar-skjald saw, sees others' “faces” as more important than his own, and who in working for the good of others is not first seeking something for himself.

Such a leader, of course, needs certain skills as well. David certainly had skills, and, in fact, he had so many political skills that many people wondered if he wasn't just being canny in the loyalty he presented. But mere skill, mere talent doesn't last, it doesn't go deep, and it doesn't in the end make others great, at least not spiritually great, unless there is this faithfulness.

For mere talent, mere charisma doesn't stand side by side with people in solidarity, in solidarity with their destiny and their frustrations. That is where being a pastor – or an elder or a deacon, for all this applies to them, too – is different than being a CEO or anything else. That is where God's house is different than any other house, and tending it is different than anything else.

In the coming months, you are going to be searching for someone to lead you in coming years. In doing so, be therefore wise, and look for a man or woman who is above all, like David, someone who is faithful. But also understand something about that search: in searching for such a person you yourselves need to be faithful to God and each other, for otherwise you may not ever recognize such a person when you do find her or him. And if you are like that, you will be a great church together.