

"What Does Leadership Look Like?"

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February 5th 2017

First Congregational UCC Rapid City,

SD

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"What Does Leadership Look Like?"

Dee and I appreciate the covenant we have with this congregation for Break Through Inc. We thank you for all the support and gifts to help Break Through mission.

Let me paint a picture for you this morning. Twelve years ago I gave a presentation in Washington State to a parent group while I was on tour. After my presentation a bunch of balloons dropped down from the ceiling. You are right. It was election time and the balloons were red, white and blue. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a little boy playing with the balloons.

I decided to go and get down on my hands and knees with the little boy and play with him and the balloons. It reminded me as when I was a little boy that enjoyed playing with these balloons. I noticed very quickly that the boy had physical disabilities. His grandmother was close by and watching over him and soon I got up and introduced myself to her. We engaged in a conversation. She asked me a series of questions based on my own experience. She was concerned not only for

the boy but for herself. She was not a young woman and she was "up in age" taking care of a 4 year old energetic individual who had some physical challenges. She began to enter in to the conversation with this series of questions because she was deeply concerned not for her own well-being but for his.

She could have told me about her life and how her freedom was robbed by the poor choices other people made but she stood to the task and focused her energy to his well- being.

Johnny was a boy of 4 years old. He had cerebral palsy and living with his grandmother. Apparently his parents were more interested in their lifestyle than taking care of this cute little boy that was born with cerebral palsy.

The grandmother was anxious to talk with me about concerns she had about his life beyond being a "cute little boy" that loved to play with balloons. There were many questions that she asked me. What happens when the cuteness rubs off? Will people pay attention to him? Doesn't everybody ask that question of what kind of future they would have? Would they get a good

education? Would they get a good job; would they get married; and would they be happy?

As I reflect on Johnny's situation with his grandmother I am speculating that sixty three years ago my parents were faced with those same questions when they realized that I was born with cerebral palsy. My parents made a very hard decision at my age of 4 years old to send me to the crippled children's school 250 miles away. For them it was the best decision for that time. I was there for eight years and I had physical therapy and speech therapy. The kinds of questions that parents and loved ones have are about what kind of a successful life that each one of us have is a concern. But, is it more important to ask that question or is it "what would make that person's life successful" that would go beyond money and status?

The thing about Johnny was that the Grandmother asked was "Will he be happy?" My parents probably thought beyond my success would I be satisfied as a person.

Isn't that the real question that people have as how would people get along in life? It is more than the surface things you see as it is the satisfaction deep down inside of how you feel about yourself. In my case, how do I feel as a person beyond what is visible to other folks? I am very satisfied about who I am. I am satisfied for the accomplishments I have made to show because of my hard work and determination of who I am. I was given up to be a person with a low IQ but I am a person that has great worth with myself because I am at peace with myself. I went beyond expectations diagnosed by medical people. I hold a college degree, CEO and founder of a non-profit organization. I am also an author, a public speaker and a commissioned minister.

My conversation with that grandmother that night was that she wanted to know if Johnny would be okay when the "cuteness" rubbed off. My concern will be will Johnny be okay with himself? Can he be at peace with his disability?

What are we learning with the children's sermons on Sundays when Pastor Susan talks to the children? What lessons can we as adults learn from them? What kind of values are we trying to teach these children that don't have high profile jobs or status yet in their young life? I think that we have a great deal to learn from children and what we did as children when we lived a simple life. As a child I had fun and I knew who I was. Yes, I struggled as a child as a person with a disability but I learned very quickly that I had to be at peace with myself before I could go beyond and to extend my feelings to other people. That is what I hope for Johnny in that no matter what he does in life that little boy inside of him would say I am at peace with myself and everything else is extra. This is what I believe Jesus was getting at when he said "let the little children come to me". I hope we do have great lessons that can be taught by these little ones that come in front of us every Sunday. Let them become our teachers.

The real question is what does leadership look like and who are our leaders? I think that the real question Johnny's grandmother was asking was could "Johnny be

a leader?" My answer is that Johnny is already a great leader because he is teaching every human being (that is in touch with him) a lifelong lesson on who you are in spite of anything you cannot do. I have been told by people that have been around me and other people with disabilities that they learned so much by being a part of our lives. I have friends of mine that are now in professions and they come up to me and said "I am a special education teacher because of you or I am a physical or speech therapist because of you. You never know when that "teachable moment" becomes reality. Every Sunday we have a teachable moment as the children give us that gift. The question is what do we do with it? I can also say that people learn from what I am even if I only share a few words with the simple fact of my disability as the "teachable moment" to everyone that comes in contact with me. It is their attitude of how they will respond to me. They need to make that choice. We need to make that choice every Sunday morning what leadership do these children give us? Therefore, rather than asking "what is going to happen when Johnny gets older?"; "Will the cuteness rub off?"; but rather ask "what is he teaching you now?" Have we

ever thought this way before? Perhaps. Children challenge us to become better people in how honest they are and innocent.

Leadership comes in interesting packages. Who would ever consider "Johnny" to be a leader? He is a leader not because he appointed himself as one. People that work with him are in that setting of the "teachable moments" which can happen. That teachable moment is only there because Johnny is the one that is teaching them (at that moment). It may not be apparent at that time but within that person's lifetime they will reflect back to that time with Johnny and they will realize they were taught by him. That is so much of our human gifts and the "giver" was not even aware of it. You as parents receive that every day from your children.

We as a congregation receive that every week from the children's time with Pastor Susan. Can I say that leadership comes in different forms but can be as powerful as anybody can imagine.

During my tenure of being the director of Break Through I have been involved in many conversations like the one I had with Johnny's grandmother.

The thread here is the conversations about "what is going to happen?" to my son or daughter. We can fill in the blanks. One conversation that haunts me is a conversation that I had with a parent that was threatened by her son and had to keep her bedroom door locked at night. She was concerned about her son's future. As I was listening to her I had nothing to say but to be there to listen to her. She knew that her son was in trouble. Here is a parent who was concerned about him but did not want to give up on him. She also needed to be concerned not only for his safety but her own and her family's safety.

I want to leave you with this picture in your mind of a very bright seventh grader who was at a retreat with me about thirty years ago. About an hour and half after I had given my presentation she came up to me with tears in her eyes. She was not a parent but she was concerned about her future with her friendships and her relationships because she had a big deep secret. She was beautiful and very intelligent individual but her deep secret was that she could not read. In the conversation we had together she said she was afraid to

tell her peers that she could not read because she thought they would leave her and make fun of her.

We have a deep problem in this Country about how youth see themselves because of the attitudes of other people. Over the last 38 years I have been fighting against these stereotypes by helping the general public to become more understanding about persons with disabilities. Fortunately, in this congregation we have time with children and they are the key for these teachable moments. Can we all agree that they can be our greatest teachers of the day.

Break Through, Inc.

"Our mission is one of rehabilitation education and advocacy for and about people with disabilities to encourage and enlighten the public about people with disabilities in that they are people first and have rights and needs and that they also have gifts and talents to bring to the community."

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