

“The Point of Leadership”

Music has always been an important part of my life. When I was a little kid, my parents taught me how to use the cabinet record player. It was not a stereo console with two speakers and storage for your LPs that came along later. This was a cabinet about two feet wide and three or four feet tall. The speaker was in the lower part, and the turntable was in the top. Rather than plopping me in front of the TV, my mom would set me on a kitchen stool that would get me to just the right height. There I would sit putting forty-fives on the spindle and playing pop songs. By age three or four, I had the dexterity to change the records and run the mechanism. I would entertain myself by playing records that were mostly ones my parents had bought, like the Mills Brothers, Debbie Reynolds, the Ames Brothers, Frank Sinatra, and the like.

As I got older, I still listened to those songs, but I also started singing in kids' choirs and choruses. My first Bible was given to me for being part of the children's choir at Fredericksburg Baptist Church. I also sang in elementary school choruses.

One day during chorus practice, I watched our teacher, Mr. Dodson, playing the piano. I went home that day and told my parents I wanted to take piano lessons. Fortunately, we already owned a spinet piano. We just had to find a teacher. Mrs. Gennilla Pates was the choice. So it was that I started taking piano lessons in sixth grade.

Mrs. Pates not only offered instruction in piano but also what she called theory classes. It was not like the music theory I encountered in college, but we learned more about music history, technique, and composition. We also had elocution lessons. We would memorize and recite little stories, poems, and doggerel. We learned to be poised and speak clearly in front of audiences.

In Junior High and High School, we sang more complex music. We started singing in parts. The music was no longer simple folk songs, but songs from musicals, madrigals, and choral pieces by great composers. Miss Booth and Mrs. Disraeli were our teachers.

In college, I was challenged even more. We sang great music by Bach, Vaughan Williams, Mendelssohn, Barber, and Britten, to name a few. We did not just sing in school; we performed from Richmond to Philadelphia, New York City, and New England. We also sang overseas in Notre Dame Cathedral, Cologne Cathedral, Westminster Abbey, Coventry Cathedral, Oxford University, and the original Bruton Parish (a big deal since Bruton Parish Church is a short walk from where we rehearsed at William & Mary).

Since then, I have performed with choirs and chorales big and small. I have sung in musicals, operettas, with the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, and in the National Cathedral. What started as a way to keep me occupied as a tyke became a lifetime of challenge, enjoyment, and fulfillment.

What is amazing about my personal story of singing and playing music is how each teacher fostered me. They did not just teach me notes, words, and technique; they communicated something beyond themselves. These people pointed outward to something greater. Specifically, they pointed me toward the joy of listening to music, making music, and sharing music with others.

That is what the greatest people in our world do. They do not point to their own significance, abilities, or accomplishments; they point beyond themselves to other people, ideas, and visions. It could be something concrete, or a hope, or a dream that they have for us or society. They point beyond themselves and beyond the things they teach or mentor to something transcendent.

John the Baptist is such a man in today's Gospel. Surrounded by his own disciples, he sees Jesus in the distance and says, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" That is an ego-free statement. He is telling his own followers that there is the man you should be listening to and following.

If John was insecure, he might have dismissed Jesus as a lesser teacher or even a fraud. If he wanted to keep the focus on himself, he would have drawn his disciples in. However, John knew that his role was to point the way to God. He told his followers he was here to prepare the way for someone greater. When the Pharisees asked him if he was the Messiah, he told them he was not worthy to untie the sandals of the one who was to come.

When Jesus comes on the scene, John sends his disciples to follow him. And they do. While John's disciples may not understand who Jesus is and what he is telling them, still they follow. They follow because their teacher pointed the way.

John and the best of our mentors live beyond themselves. They know that there is something beyond what they can see. They have dreams that may not be fulfilled in their lifetime. But it does not matter because their lives point beyond this world to a world where God's love and peace are the goal.

They have dreams like a man who is a hero to me now, but I am sad to say was not a hero in my childhood. This man pointed beyond himself to a world where all are free and honored, and all people are respected as children of God. This man said "I have a dream" and he quoted the prophet Isaiah saying, "that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight; and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together." In that same speech, this man quoted my favorite biblical prophet, Amos, saying our world would not be healed until, "justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream."

Whether it is one of my music teachers, the prophets Isaiah and Amos, John the Baptist, or the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., change agents and true leaders always point beyond themselves to the seat of all that is good, just, and holy. They point to God. Because they believe the words of today's Psalm, "Happy are they who trust in the LORD! . . . how great [are] your wonders and your plans for us!" And as Isaiah wrote, God's "salvation [will] reach to the end of the earth."

Let us be like my music teachers, John the Baptist, Dr. King, and use what is best in ourselves to point away from ourselves to that which is righteous, holy, and good. Let us keep our eyes and ears open to the one who has come into the world not to condemn the world but that all might be saved. Let us point with all our heart, mind, and spirit toward God whose love and mercy never change. Let us point the way to our one true home in Christ Jesus our Lord, who with the Father and the Holy Spirit are one God whose love is for every person and whose mercy is everlasting.