

Psalm 149:3-4 & Luke 8:1-3
“The Dance of Leadership: Will You Follow God’s Lead?”
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Roslindale Congregational Church, UCC, Roslindale, MA
First Sunday in Lent, March 6, 2022

The Readings:

Psalm 149:3-4

³ *Let them praise God’s name with dancing,
making melody to God with tambourine and lyre.*

⁴ *For the Lord takes pleasure in his people and
adorns the humble with victory.*

Luke 8:1-3

Soon afterwards Jesus went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, ² as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, ³ and Joanna, the wife of Herod’s steward Chuza (pronounced “kyoo’ zuh), and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.

This is the time of year when we can see the way that Roslindale Congregational Church is organized and how it approaches leadership. March 20 will be the Annual Meeting of the entire congregation, and this meeting is when RCC makes several decisions, such as how you will spend your collective financial resources, how you will divide the work of ministry between officers, deacons, committees, and teams, and who you will elect to lead these various roles.

The Church is not organized quite like any other group that you know. There may be some similarities, but, for instance, a church is not exactly like a family; its way of making decisions is not really the same as that of the government either; how it gets things done is not necessarily as this would occur in a business. Leadership in the church is not handled exactly the same way as it is in a classroom, or a hospital, or the military. **The Church has a unique purpose and practices.**

So, like me, are you at least a bit curious about how this group of **Jesus followers in the first century** organized *itself* and how *it* exercised leadership? Do you wonder about how this movement made decisions and got things done?

These three verses in Luke tell us more than we may realize at first. They tell us that those following Jesus were not just the twelve disciples, later called apostles. In addition to them, there was a broader, unnumbered *community* of disciples made up of women *and* men, and probably some children - people who traveled with Jesus “through cities and villages.” Because the women are named here – Mary, Joanna, Susanna, “and many others,” we know that they were not just anonymous figures in the crowds, but part of the fellowship.

We know from another passage that Judas was involved with keeping track of the community ‘purse,’ and I assume that Levi, the former tax collector, had some say in the finances – maybe his auditor? These verses tell us that these women gave of their “resources” (“means” or “possessions”) to provide for this Messiah Movement.

When it came to other aspects of being community, we know that Peter, James, and John were a kind of inner circle, but I wonder if there was a Council? Did Jesus’ followers ever vote? Did Jesus need to approve everything, or some things? How else did they divide up duties? Their diverse backgrounds probably also meant that they had different opinions about what was best for the ministry. Think of the miracle it was that all these diverse followers got along well enough to live and spread the good news!!

The Church was actually started later in time, after the Resurrection, but it built upon this first century foundation. And from your own experience with church, you have likely learned that different church groups have different models of organization and leadership. You can tell something about how RCC is set up by our ‘middle name:’ “congregational.” It’s much more complicated than this, but suffice it for now to say that “congregational” means that the local *congregation* organizes itself by voluntary consent and covenant with each other, rather than according to the dictates of an external hierarchy of authority.

Let me also quickly name some *misconceptions* about what congregational polity in the United Church of Christ means. Some people erroneously equate it with being a democracy, assuming that **majority rules** in all it decides and does. Others make the mistake of saying that the **laity rule**, reasoning that since we are different from other communions in which priests and bishops rule, that in our case, the minister has less authority. Still another misunderstanding is that the **laity rule in practical matters and the clergy in the spiritual**, as if one can actually separate the two!

The Preamble of our United Church of Christ constitution declares that Jesus Christ is “the sole head of the church,” and Article III says that our church is organized “to the end that the whole church will seek God’s will and be faithful to God’s mission.” So to say it in even clearer terms: **God rules.** *This* is to be the organizing principle for each congregation.

Guess what? **This same principle of organization and leadership is found in these verses from Luke!** Where? You ask. Verse one: Jesus and his followers proclaimed to others the good news of the *kingdom* of God. The “kingdom of God” was what Jesus preached; it was their purpose, *and* it was their practice. To say “kingdom of God” is equal to saying the “rule of God.” God rules.

This needs further clarification. The “kingdom of God” that Jesus and his followers were preaching and enacting was never a feudal city with stonewalls and mote, or any single place with geographical boundaries over which God would be King. Nor was or is it an entirely *separate* place or realm outside of the earth, or only beyond this life, or simply in our own hearts. Rather, the kingdom of God is wherever and whenever God “rules,” or “governs;” it is more a verb: when what *God* wants is being done. The language that I personally prefer and the definition that I think is accurate is that the Kingdom or Reign of God is whenever and wherever God is *leading*.

This first century group was good news, because it was following *God’s* lead through Jesus Christ, *not* that of Caiaphas, Herod, Pilate, or Rome, but the leadership of

the Creator of the Universe: eternal, holy, Love! The Jesus group was not an institution per say, but a *movement* – a movement that was fun, forgiving, freeing, and full of faith! It was such an attractive alternative to the violent, selfish ways of ruling the world with which they and we are so well acquainted; it was so compelling that the crowds flocked to him! Following Jesus must have been like a party and his group of followers a dynamic, encouraging, and just group, moving to God’s music!

Hey! **It was like a community *dancing with each other to God’s leadership.*** Now *that’s* a new model to consider! Hmm. The Greek word for “Kingdom of God” is “basileia.” Basileia. This word even sounds like a new Latin dance! Shall we?