



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen, Parish Minister
The Reverend Don Randall, Community Minister

“Considering the Ides of March”

© by the Reverend Alison W. Eskildsen

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Centering Thoughts

From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and, from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked. Luke 12:48

It is not in the stars to hold our destiny but in ourselves. William Shakespeare, “Julius Caesar”

If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader. John Quincy Adams

A leader is anyone willing to help, anyone who sees something that needs to change and takes the first steps to influence that situation. Margaret J. Wheatley

Sermon

Poor Julius Caesar, attacked by foes he thought friends. Within a month of his death, the Ides of March had taken on new meaning, clearly communicating Caesar’s very, very, bad day. Now, few know the Ides mean the time of a full moon. We might not even speak of the Ides of March were it not for Shakespeare’s memorably tragic play.

On this Ides of March, let us consider the past for wisdom we can apply to the present. So, in a slight alteration of the words of Caesar’s eulogist, Marc Antony, “Friends, Athenians, countrymen, lend me your ears.”

Before that fateful day in March, Julius Caesar’s good works earned him a reputation as a brilliant military leader. He engaged his generals in strategic planning, took personal risk on the field of battle, and rewarded his soldiers with the spoils of war. The Roman citizens he fought for were rewarded with a degree of peace, prosperity, and stability. His success led to his election to the Roman Senate, a deliberative, democratic body. But Caesar’s military prowess, the people’s adulation, and his growing power blinded him. He stopped listening to others, as if he could do no wrong. The laurel leaf of victory became a golden crown of dictatorship threatening the democratic ideals he once championed. As his need for control and command grew, the Roman people became less important. When a soothsayer cautioned him to beware, Caesar dismissed the warning and paid the ultimate price for that dismissal.

Leadership failures are not limited to 44 BCE, the year Caesar was assassinated. Brian Williams, the NBC News anchor, falsely reported he survived rocket-propelled grenade fire while riding in a

helicopter over Iraq. Secretary of Veteran Affairs Robert McDonald lied when he told a homeless veteran he also had served in the elite Special Forces. Conservative pastors and politicians who rail against homosexuality have been caught in homosexual affairs. In exchange for national prominence and revenue, many universities allow athletes an academic pass, betraying their own standards and purposes. Police departments neglect to look like the communities they serve. And, in the age of Twitter and Instagram and the like, videos show bystanders merely watching while teenage gangs beat up innocent victims. All exemplify leadership failures.

A leader needs to be honest to gain the trust of those being led. A leader needs to see the big picture, and recognize the consequences of their organization's action or inaction. A leader needs to be committed to the growth of their followers. A leader needs to stand up when others do not. A failure to be truthful, a failure to maintain standards, and a failure to respond to changing needs are failures in leadership. Sadly, there are many examples.

And yet we still need leaders, nationally, locally, and even within this religious community. Margaret Wheatley, a leadership development expert, claims anyone who responds to a need is a leader. I agree. The opposite of a leader is not a follower, because followers also lead. One who stays silent in the face of bigotry, one who stays home rather than vote, one who hides rather than volunteer, one who is able but keeps their purse closed rather than give generously, and one who sits on their hands is neither a leader nor a follower. They are the status quo. Change needs leaders and followers, not sitters.

The beloved community demands leaders who serve our high ideals of justice, freedom, and love. Leaders we can trust must be servants to these values that lie beyond our own personal desires. Nearly a century after Caesar died Jesus showed by example how we should lead—by loving one another. For example, in the *Gospel according to John*, Chapter 13, we're told that Jesus got up from the table, took off his outer robe, tied a towel around his waist, poured water into a basin, and began to wash and dry the disciples' feet.

Astonished by this act, Peter questioned Jesus who responded, "If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them." [John 13:14-17]

In this passage, Jesus' act of humility, of master becoming servant, indicates no leader is above who or what they serve. Jesus served his values by washing the disciple's feet. Jesus was not serving the disciples whose feet he washed. As a leader of this community I too am subservient to our shared values and vision. Notice, I didn't say I am subservient to you. Although Jesus felt he was no better than the disciples, he did not say he served them, either. If I served you rather than our shared values, I'd spend all my energy worrying about whether you were happy or not. My service would really be enslavement. My leadership, and yours, too, should focus on meeting our mission and vision through service to our values as described in our Seven Principles. That is the master who owns me and you, to phrase it as Jesus did.

Christian clergy are supposed to follow Jesus' example. But yesterday, I read in the paper about a megachurch pastor that seems to conflict with this. The Associated Press reported:

The ministry of a prominent Georgia megachurch pastor and evangelist who teaches that God wants to bless the faithful with earthly riches is seeking donations to buy a luxury jet

valued at more than 65 million dollars. The website of Creflo Dollar Ministries asked people Friday to “Sow your love gift of any amount” to help the ministry buy a Gulfstream G650 airplane. Dollar and his wife, Taffi, are co-pastors of World Changers International Church in College Park. (Athens Banner Herald, March 14, 2015)

Who do you think this pastor is serving? I don't think it is Jesus or Christian values! I think Pastor Dollar, if you can believe that name, needs a timely word from a soothsayer. Granted, we also are asking you to open your purse and give a gift of love for our Annual Budget Drive. But trust me. We're not trying to buy an airplane.

Fortunately, not all leaders fail to live up to their values. Gandhi was a successful servant who led the people of India to realize their vision of freedom. Albert Schweitzer, Mother Theresa, and Martin Luther King, Jr., also led successfully. They were all called or motivated by a particular set of values, beliefs, or principles greater than their own personal need or gratification. They chose not to be silent or take an easy life path. They chose a hard road that served a higher ideal.

You are servant leaders, too. As Parker Palmer said in our first reading, you take the lead several times a day. You lead with your smiles. You lead with your decisions. You likely serve your family above yourself. You likely serve your students or clients above yourself. And you serve the values of Unitarian Universalism that enables us to make a difference in people's lives. Your leading or volunteering here I'm sure, occasionally, inconveniences other aspects of your life. But that you stand up anyway testifies to your commitment to what we stand for. We are blessed by your service to something greater than yourself.

How, then, do we get other leaders to remember they serve something greater? I think the answer is by being leaders ourselves. We can lead by example. We can hold leaders accountable for their actions in the voting booth. We can remind them of the bigger picture by speaking up, standing up, and showing up. We can volunteer in big and small ways. We can support the Fellowship by giving some of our time, talent, and treasure, knowing we're serving our Seven Principles and improving lives as a result.

In the process, we're also serving ourselves. Leadership and volunteering offers each of us opportunities for spiritual growth. We learn about ourselves, gain purpose in our lives, and connect in meaningful ways with one another. Leadership and serving our values is a spiritual practice that grows our understanding and commitments.

But being a leader isn't always easy. When we stand up, we become someone else's target, someone else's scapegoat. Assassinations still take place.

And leaders always risk failure. But failure can teach us how to do better next time. And if we don't take that risk, we lose the chance for great reward, such as realizing the beloved community. That vision is too important not to risk leading our way there. If we do nothing, if we go nowhere, I believe we will perish. The world will change around us and it may not become the world we wish.

This congregation didn't survive 60 years without risk-taking and good leadership. You risked buying land, building this structure, and taking on a mortgage. Your faith proved to be well-founded as we have nearly paid off that loan. We may risk expanding our building in the near future. Not to build a mansion suitable for Pastor Dollar, but to better serve our current needs.

You also risked moving to two worship services. You risked changing the bylaws to better serve current needs. You risked deeper engagement with diverse faith partnerships in Athens. Any of these could have or might still lead to failure. If so, we will learn from any mistakes. At least we are not frozen in fear.

I am proud to be one of many servant leaders here. May you and I never lose sight of why we lead, where we are going, and who we are going with. May we find joy in serving. And, may we have no reason to beware of the Ides of March.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. Describe a time you felt called to lead. What prompted you and what did you hope to realize?
2. How do you respond to authority, power or leadership? Do you resist or welcome it? Why?
3. Are you or UUFA called to lead, and if so, in what ways? Why or why not?
4. What spiritual gifts have you received from leading or being involved in a project or issue?