

Descending Into Greatness

Philippians 2: 1-11

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Bill Hybels, one of the most influential Lutheran theologians of our time along with Rick Warren and John Maxwell, in his book ***Descending into Greatness***, describes the formation of pecking orders. He writes:

Take 10 chickens. Any ten. Put them in a pen together, and spread a little chicken feed ... in a matter of minutes, the chickens that were previously strangers will establish a pecking order.

Chicken number one will peck at and intimidate chicken number two; chicken number two takes it then turns around and pecks at chicken number three. And the pecking order continues all the way down to chicken number ten, who needless to say has a pretty miserable life: Pecked, but with no one to peck.

Apparently, the same pecking order was going on in the congregation at Philippi as well. Some were considering themselves better than others. We shouldn't be surprised. It seems that the same kind of thing happened among the disciples of Jesus. Take 12 disciples – any 12 – put them together and it won't be long before they attempt to form a pecking order with each one vying to become chicken number one. ***Mark 9*** tells us that the disciples were having an argument on the way to Capernaum about who was the greatest. And you get the sense that no one was nominating any of the other disciples. Instead, they were nominating themselves!

“I am the greatest, one them would say and he would make his case to become chicken number one. “No, I am the greatest,” another would say. And on and on it went all the way to Capernaum.

Are we any different? Aren't we just as driven to establish our place at the top of the pecking order? Don't we all have the same secret desire to be seen as chicken number one? Take ten administrators, any ten, put us in a room together and watch the maneuvering begin. We trot out the size of our school or how much it has grown under our leadership, the number of staff we supervise, the excellence of our programs, the success of our teams and on and on, all trying to stake our claim to being chicken number one. And if we can't stake our claim to number one by the numbers we will do it by arguing over who is having the most difficult year!

And so it goes ... every time we gather, this statement could be made:

And an argument arose among them about who was the greatest.

Jesus gives us a very different paradigm. He says:

If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all.

In this text and in our text from Philippians, scripture addresses our universal hunger for significance, to matter. And notice, neither Jesus nor Paul condemns us for having the desire to be significant, to make a difference. They just ask us to try a new approach to satisfying that desire.

Throughout his ministry Jesus proclaimed this truth over and over again: **if you want to be great serve ... if you want to be first, be last ... you will find your life by losing it ... you descend into greatness.**

Now, let me ask you:

- Do you really buy this?
- Do you believe that what scripture says about serving and significance is true?
- Do you believe the path to greatness begins at the servant's entrance?
- Are you really willing to put the needs of others before your own needs – to humble yourself?

I am not so sure we are. Sure, we might say that if we really wanted to be the greatest we would have never become educators in the first place. We would have become pastors, or we would have went into business or become doctors, or lawyers or any of the more prestigious professions. But I don't think that is what our text is getting at. You don't become humble, because you choose to work in the church. You become humble because you put someone else's needs before yours. As Lutheran educators we must put the needs of the children in our schools above our need to be loved and to avoid conflict.

Are you, like too many church professionals, rendered ineffective by what Bill Easum refers to as the "cult of harmony"? The "cult of harmony" is evident when ministry takes second place to feelings; when corrective feedback is seldom given to teachers because they might get upset; when we become overly worried about getting along with staff, often at the expense of the students. Keeping focused on the needs of the learner's means we can't swerve away from change or avoid conflict even when it makes those around us uncomfortable.

Authentic leaders do not ride into difficult situations to soothe anxieties and ride off into the sunset to the sound of cheers from the masses. Authentic leaders are honest about the brutal facts and are not afraid to bleed for the cause.

Our Savior was not an easygoing, ever popular leader. He rode in on an ass and rode out on a cross. He bled for his children. Are you willing to bleed for yours?

- Are willing to take on the 25-year veteran teacher that perpetuates dysfunction in your school?
- Are you willing to challenge the call of a teacher who believes his years of faithful service have earned him the right to put his needs above the needs of the learners in his room or ahead of the needs of fellow staff members?
- Are you willing to take on the influential parent who will make you bleed when you confront her about disruptive behavior that is causing distrust and dissension in the parking lot, in the halls of the school and in the community beyond the walls of the school?
- Are you willing to challenge and change long-held assumptions, policies and practices at your school that make the present very comfortable for everyone but jeopardize the future?

Winston Churchill was an extremely effective leader but he was not always popular. He said, "There is no worse mistake in public leadership than to hold out false hopes soon to be swept away." He wasn't afraid to confront brutal facts and he forced others to see things they preferred to avoid.

One of the most powerful chapters in Jim Collin's book *Good To Great* is titled "Confront the Brutal Facts Yet never Lose Faith." Let's look at ten brutal facts I think face Lutheran schools today. As you will see later, these facts are only meant to be descriptive, not prescriptive. They may or may not apply to your school. Neither do I pretend to have solutions. But I do know this: your school is facing brutal facts whether or not the ones I am about to share apply to you or not.

- As membership in the LCMS shrinks our identity as Lutheran schools will have less and less significance. Consequently, competition for students and teachers will dramatically increase. Better public schools and charter schools, other Christian schools and non-sectarian schools will become viable options for our families.
- Rising costs will alienate current clients and many congregational members. The cost to the parents and to the congregation will eventually reach a point where they will question the worth of the school. Small schools probably won't survive.

- There is something terribly wrong with a system that allows the “integrity” of the Call to have precedence over the advancement of the Gospel and loving service to God’s people.
- Parents will become even more consumer-oriented and difficult to manage.
- Weakness, confusion, self-interest and the under performance of school boards is a liability that workshops or new governance models won’t fix.
- Despite our efforts to promote diversity, we, as a synod and school system, are not ready to live in a world where whites are the minority.
- The biggest obstacle to full enrollment is not a lack of marketing but a tolerance of mediocrity.
- It is disingenuous to call ourselves “outreach ministries” when we use the tuition of our non-members to fund the tuition breaks we give our members.
- We have schools designed for and educators trained for a school that resides in Jerusalem while we live in Babylon.¹
- As a system, our schools are not as healthy as we think they are.

We can no longer afford to put our heads in the sand and hope that everything will change back to the way it used to be. What were common descriptors for us in the past – stable, predictable, logical, linear, long-range, fixed, tasks, roles and rules are being replaced with descriptors that are quite the opposite: turbulent, unpredictable, fluid, pragmatic, adaptable, emerging and process. To put it another way, we cannot “strategically plan” our way through the “brutal facts” that confront us.

For one thing, strategy and planning are not the same thing. When making strategy, leaders must encourage divergent thinking and embrace the complexity, discontinuity and novelty of the world in which their organizations operate. Strategy is discovering, inventing, subversive and revolutionary. Planning is anything but that; planning values convergent thinking and seeks to build structures. Don’t get me wrong: planning is important and necessary but combining two completely different ways of thinking into one process is a flaw that will always sabotage taking your organization to the next level.

¹ The Jerusalem/Babylon metaphor comes from Dr. Robert Newton, president of the CNH District, LCMS.

We must, instead, re-culture for the brutal changes that must occur. To do so, we must:

- Be honest about the brutal facts that face us;
- Build unity around a common vision and moral purpose;
- Acknowledge and build on the strengths of everyone involved;
- Give people authentic choices and empower them to act. Hold them responsible for the choices they make; and probably most important of all
- Be humble enough to accept that looking “to the interests of others” must supersede our need for harmony and stability.

A brutal fact is a truth that will impact your school’s ability to fulfill their mission, either in the short term or in the future. These truths are brutal because facing them will upset someone’s sense of security. As a leader you have to be on the ground with the troops, immersed in the present and you must also be hovering at 5000 feet, with an eye on the future. Examining the brutal facts leads to an awareness of a need for change. Sometimes the needed change is a slight tweaking of a process or policy and sometimes it is a major change of course but change is always hard.

Leaders guide their schools toward change by connecting knowledge of the brutal facts to the mission of the school. If the mission of the school is to serve children with compassion but you have a teacher who uses negative labels for learners who struggle and plays favorites you have to connect changing the teacher’s interaction with students to the school’s mission. If your school’s mission is to support learners in the achievement of academic excellence but your test scores indicate that a significant number of your students are functioning below grade level you have to make sure all the school’s stakeholders know the truth and are engaged in addressing all student needs. Leaders don’t have to give solutions but they must frame the context by connecting reality to the vision and mission and they must build unity.

Building unity around a common vision and moral purpose is not accomplished in a weekend visioning retreat where mission statements and visions are cranked out with the help of a consultant. Stakeholders in the school and church community unite around a common purpose when their leader does the following three things on a daily basis, in all interactions with staff, students, parents and church members: demonstrates care for all stakeholders, frames all discussions and decisions around what is best for students and believes in the abilities and possibilities inherent in staff and students.

1. An effective leader demonstrates authentic care for all stakeholders. Leaders demonstrate care by being accessible, listening with empathy and communicating openly with all parties. Be present, be patient, be honest. Empathy is the key to understanding the Philippians passage: be humble enough to sense other's emotions, understand their perspective and take an active interest in their concerns.
2. Educational leaders with a moral purpose always frame discussions and decisions about the use of time, money and talent around what is best for the students. The purpose of gathering data about student achievement is to inform decisions about how to use resources to best serve kids. The purpose of raising money, adding programs or building buildings is always to serve the needs of kids not to keep up with the school down the road or meet the expectations of parents.
3. Unifying leaders passionately believe that the school and church have the ability to serve kids in powerful ways. They are not afraid to declare the possibilities and fight for the resources to make that happen. This is the principal who has faith in her staff's abilities to "make it happen" for the kids and then goes to the mat for the staff to make sure they have what it takes to succeed. This is not about high expectations but about positive expectations – believing that others can succeed and then investing in them.

The good news is that most board members, teachers and parents are deeply committed to building and maintaining a successful school. They also possess many talents that are and will continue to be essential elements of the school's success. Effective leaders know the strengths of the members of their community. They look for strengths, especially hidden or underutilized strengths.

This is what one principal did when he was dealing with a middle school math teacher who was struggling to maintain order in the classroom and positive relationships with parents. This principal knew that the teacher is also a gifted art teacher who can inspire students of all ages to create in exciting and enjoyable ways. This principal makes sure that other teachers and parents know about the math teacher's strengths in art. Then, through working with others, the principal figured out how to add opportunities for art at all grade levels, first it was in a mini-session course and special projects during Lent, Advent and Lutheran Schools Week. In the second year the school offered a special project period once a week when the teacher could rotate throughout the school and share her talents with kids and teachers at all grade levels.

Often, not always, when a struggling teacher feels successful and is acknowledged she will be more open and ready to make changes that will

improve her practice. Certainly the community's distrust or anxiety about the teacher will be slightly defused, creating a more positive atmosphere.

Effective administrators build on strengths by looking for them, broadcasting and celebrating them and creating opportunities for all stakeholders to share their strengths.

OK—so you have mastered being present with the troops while keeping an eye on the future; you continually connect actions and resources to the mission and you continually seek, use and celebrate strengths of all stakeholders. Wow! That's a lot of balls to keep in the air! How do you do all that and innovate, analyze and refine?

You can't. It may or may not take a village to raise a child but it certainly takes a team to run a school. The administrator is the head coach and the manager. You need a strong first string, a capable second string and a supportive bunch of bench-riders. Building and managing this team requires more than writing goals, developing timelines and delegating tasks. If you want an engaged and productive team you have to make sure all the stakeholders are **empowered and accountable**.

Empowerment is more than making people feel good about themselves. It is giving them authentic choices and power. To truly be empowered people need information, skills, choice and metrics for measuring success. I have observed several school leaders who have used these tools of empowerment to build teams that serve students successfully.

- The first example is one where information led to empowerment. Fourth grade math scores were drastically lower than scores in grades 2 and 3. It just so happens that teachers in grades 4-6 use a different math curriculum than grades K-3. You can predict what the opinions regarding the lower scores were. The lower grade teachers were sure that the low scores were the result of the curriculum in the upper grades. The upper grade teachers thought the problem was lack of preparation in the lower grades. Before the battle escalated the administrator organized a team to study the problem. He gave them the power to choose strategies for improvement and challenged them to raise scores within two years. He also made sure all of the data connected to math instruction was available. Time devoted to math instruction and time of day that math was taught were two of the data points. This administrator was very thorough and included a record of discipline referrals for the year being studied. Now the principal did not notice one interesting fact but the team grasped it very quickly. Math was taught after lunch each day and the fourth grade was having a very tough time at lunch recess. There were referrals of fourth graders to

the office several times a week at lunch and often the same kids were referred several times a month. Not only was this a serious discipline and supervision problem, but it had impacted instruction because too many students were missing math instruction. Further examination revealed that the kids with a higher number of referrals had lower math scores. The staff immediately re-taught playground procedures, lunch supervisors were let go and the new supervisors were better trained. In addition lunch-time referrals were returned to class by the start of the afternoon period and dealt with after school. The next year math scores in grades 4 and 5 were improved. The administrator did not have to find the problem or come up with the solution. A solution was discovered when the administrator empowered a team by giving them the ability to make choices and by providing them with information.

- The second example is one where skills lead to empowerment. In this case a new administrator arrived at a school where there was a very unpopular fifth grade teacher. This teacher was just beginning her second year and no one had any hope for a better year than last year when behavior problems, unclear assignments, mis-graded tests and lost homework assignments were perceived as overall incompetence. Four families had withdrawn and four more failed to reenroll. The administrator could not just praise this teacher and hope that when she felt better she would do better. Frankly there was nothing to praise. The administrator had to make it absolutely clear that changes needed to be made for the sake of the students who deserved to learn. This situation called for a traditional leader- trust me, follow and we will reach our goal. The teacher was not thrilled about working closely with the administrator but had no choice. The administrator made it very clear that she expected all enrolled students to complete the school year. The goal was no withdrawals due to dissatisfaction.

Before the year started the teacher was guided in room arrangement, development of a daily routine and classroom procedures, shelves were cleaned, graffiti was scrubbed of the desks and the room was decorated. A lovely room and a more confident teacher greeted skeptical parents and students on the first day of school. Initial success along with the foundation for more success and the teacher truly felt better about herself. When she did so, she became very receptive to more suggestions. By mid year one of the parents who had not returned to the school because of this teacher had returned and by the end of the year two of the families had referred new families. Using traditional leadership techniques and knowledge about teaching and learning

this administrator turned a problem into an asset, impacting the student's experience and the school's bottom line.

- Another administrator realized that there was a creeping problem in the middle school. The 7th and 8th grade teachers had gradually dropped extra curricular programs that had been highly valued by middle-schoolers and their parents. It did not happen all at once. One year it was the student government and another year it was the service field trips. Other small but significant choices and leadership opportunities for middle school students disappeared and pretty soon families were leaving at the end of fifth and sixth grade. Reasons were given ranged from, "Public middle school is more fun," to "Middle school is just the same old thing. We are ready for a change." Middle school became the most problematic part of the school. All the focus was on grades, tardies, lost work and general discipline issues that were not new to the middle school but somehow seemed to be a bigger problem than they had been just a few years before. The teachers, both of whom had taught for many years, often complained the kids were not the same as the kids from previous years. "This is what you get," they complained, "when you get spoiled kids of divorced parents who watch too much TV and play too many video games." Soon grades 7 and 8 were so under enrolled that there was a significant negative economic impact on the school. The board was beginning to consider closing the middle school. The administrator firmly believed that small, Christian schools were the best place for 11-14 year olds and was not ready to throw in the towel. The sixth grade teacher was very interested in offering extra curricular opportunities to middle schoolers but could not change things single handed. The administrator began to attend the middle school team meetings and added the PE teacher to the team. Now the sixth grade teacher had an ally in the PE teacher and the administrator was more connected to middle school issues. The administrator asked the PE teacher and the sixth grade teacher to research extra curricular programs at all of the other middle schools in the area. When their findings were presented at a middle school team meeting the administrator did not allow the 7th and 8th grade teachers to use the "It won't work here," refrain. She then instructed the team to design a co-curricular program for the next year. She also made it clear that the board was considering closing the middle school. She stated that she had advised the board that the middle school team could turn the program around but that it would take two years. She let them know that they had her backing for two years but if enrollment was not up by 10% she would advise the board to close the school. She shared the brutal facts, mobilized a team to gather data and make choices and she defined the metrics of success.

The middle school is still open, kids are finding success in areas outside of the classroom and middle school parents have gotten very involved in helping with middle school dances and field trips.

None of the administrators I have spoken of was a genius or a miracle worker. They were effective because:

- They confronted the brutal truths even when it was painful for them and threatening to others.
- They awakened the sense of ministry in all stakeholders by building unity around the mission of the school and kept everyone focused on serving kids.
- They believed in their staffs, looked for strengths and built on them in ways that impacted the students in positive ways.
- They mobilized others to tackle the problems, made sure they had the information and skills to succeed and the metrics to define success.
- These administrators were openly accountable to school boards, parents and their staffs and they held others accountable.

Your job as principal is staggeringly complex and demanding. Thomas Homer-Dixon in an article "Leadership Captive," puts it this way:

We demand that leaders solve, or at least manage, a multitude of interconnected problems that can develop into crises without warning; we require them to navigate an increasingly turbulent reality that is, in key aspects, literally incomprehensible to the human mind; we buffet them on every side with bolder, more powerful special interests that challenge every innovative policy idea; we submerge them in often unhelpful and distracting information and we force them to decide and act at an ever faster pace.

Be humble enough right now to admit that you don't have all the solutions and can't always wear the white hat, riding in to rescue everyone. You don't have to be the only leader. There are other leaders in your school community who will join with you in leading your school from the stable and predictable world of Jerusalem to the turbulent and unknown times in Babylon. Neither do you have to be perfect.

During this season of Lent it is good for us to be reminded of when Peter denied his Lord in the courtyard of the high priest's residence. Like Peter we will, at

times, blow away our deepest convictions by irresponsible acts or decisions. Like Peter, we struggle with sin. But Peter persevered because, above all, he understood the God's grace goes deeper than our deepest sins, that God's grace keeps no score of wrongs, that God's love is totally divorced from our performance.

Like Peter, all Christians, all of us, at times feel our lives are a huge disappointment to God. Peter loved Jesus, yet at a critical moment he denied him saying:

I don't know him.

Personally, I marvel at how often I've stood with Peter and by my behavior said:

I don't know him.

Many of us cope with the guilt about not being successful enough, about not being the leaders we have been called to be. We feel beat up and bedraggled. My one confidence with my guilt is that I know God loves me. When my performance isn't good enough, when my behavior is less than exemplary, when my desire for comfort and harmony outweigh my conviction to do the right thing, I know that I can always go and throw myself on his mercy and hear him say to me over and over again:

Welcome home, Joel.

I forgive you.

Let's get up and try it again.

While Jesus accepts you and me in our failure, he always points to new beginnings. At the reunion of Jesus and Peter after Jesus' resurrection, Jesus did not rebuke Peter for his failure. He only wanted to know if Peter loved him. Peter was forgiven and restored, ready to become the rock. Jesus came not to punish but to offer forgiveness and restoration, encouragement and hope and a new game plan for the future. He offers the same to you and me.

Praise the Lord!

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