

The Space Between - Christian Leadership

Carmel Baptist Church

September 23, 2012

Intro:

- Good morning... Well, if you have been around the last couple weeks, you know that as you came to church this morning, you are coming to Carmel during a very unique time in the history of our church...
 - We have just gone through a pastoral transition.
 - Dr. Poplin has retired, and Pastor Alex Kennedy is our new Senior Pastor, as of last week.
- This truly is a pivotal time in the life of our church.
 - Where all of us are experiencing a strange mix of emotions,
 - As we say goodbye to one shepherd and say hello to another...
 - It is a strange combination of experiencing grief and great excitement at the exact same time.
- And as we have talked about this as a leadership team, it seems ridiculous to simply not acknowledge this transitional time we are in...
 - *It is clearly the big pink elephant in the room.*
 - And quite honestly, it is a really cool big pink elephant.
- So, as Dr. Poplin counseled us in his last sermon two weeks ago...
 - **It's going to be weird...**
 - **And we just need to "De-Weird" the situation...**

The Space Between:

- So instead of trying to talk around what is happening in our church right now, we are going to spend the next few weeks pushing into this time.
 - That is why we have called this five-week series until Pastor Kennedy returns, "**The Space Between.**"
 - It is the unique time "Between" chapters at Carmel.
 - We close one chapter, and begin another...
 - And during "The Space Between", our preaching team is going to look at a number of different subjects from the scriptures that speak to the place that we are in as a church.
 - We will examine topics such as:
 - God's sovereignty in change,
 - Biblical examples of "Spaces Between" and how God used them for his glory, among others...

Transition to Today –

- So to kick off this series, today, I want to look at the topic of Christian leadership in times of change...
 - Specifically, I want to look back at some of the lessons I have learned from Dr. Poplin along the way...
 - As young Christian leader, it has been such a privilege to serve with him these last six years.
 - And so today, may be a little different from most sermons I preach.
 - We will examine one main text in **Hebrews 13**.
 - Which might be the best chapter on leadership in the Bible...
 - But it will also be interwoven with some leadership lessons I have learned from Dr. Poplin along the way...
 - And we should not be surprised that the lessons I have learned on leadership from him, perfectly coincide with the best leadership chapter in the Bible...
 - I then want to look forward to the next chapter of our church and a couple lessons I have already learned from Pastor Alex.
- One thing I can tell you, is that the preparation for today has been a really good exercise for me as I process this transition in my own heart.
 - It has allowed me to reminisce on some of the things that I thought were very special...
 - And it has allowed me to grieve the change while getting very excited about this new season, all at the same time.
- And it's my hope that today might help you in your transition process as well.

Season of Transitions:

- I am not sure about any of you, but processing change is not easy...
 - Again, lets just “De-weird” this things...
- We **have been** and **still are** experiencing massive changes and hurts at Carmel:
 - We have grieved the loss of many loved ones.
 - I have said many times over the last couple years, that there have been entirely too many funerals at this church.
 - I know we can't control that, but we still have to deal with it.
 - So many of you have dealt with a great amount of grief.
 - And we grieve well because we love well...
- We have had multiple staff members move on...
 - Which is difficult for the church, but even more difficult for fellow staff members.
 - Whether it be from budget cuts, to retirements, and again the death of Pastor Russ Rosser, who so many of knew and loved so deeply...
 - And now the retirement of Dr. Poplin.
 - This really is a massive amount of change to process...

- And finally, we have experienced conflict in our church...
 - Again, lets call a **spade a spade...**
 - There are many people that I am sure are still in need of healing and reconciliation.
 - Whether it be from an interpersonal conflict or a hurt over change you did not agree with...
 - There has been and on many occasions, it has not been handled well.
- You know, it never ceases to amaze me, the capacity that we have to hurt one-another.
 - Unfortunately, often times the way Christians treat each other, is the biggest hindrance to sharing the Gospel with those who don't know Christ as Savior and Lord...
 - It is Hypocrisy... Here we preach this Gospel of love and grace, but we so easily and often tear each other down...
- It honestly doesn't make any sense at all...
 - *Have you ever noticed that in church world, if someone disagrees with someone, the normal response is it seems is to go talk to everyone except the person they disagree with???*
 - They start building their little coalition of backers and they start building their case against the person,
 - All while completely ignoring the scriptures clear command to go to the offending party to be reconciled...
- I find it very interesting that the first thing that the Apostle Paul says to those that are made new Creations in Christ, is that they have been given the ministry of reconciliation...
 - This is everywhere throughout the scriptures...
- So if your heart is not reconciled with someone or a situation that has happened at the church, let me encourage you that there is no better time to deal with it then right now...
 - By letting it fester, the person you are hurting the most is you.
- Let us use "The Space Between" to seek reconciliation...
 - To put off the old way and take on the new...
 - And ready ourselves for the exciting days that are before us...
- As we make this change in leadership at Carmel, now is the time for us to deal with these hurts and issues.

Hebrews 13:

- And so it is at this point, I want us to jump into the text...
 - Today we are going to be in Hebrews 13.
 - I really believe this passage of scripture has a lot to say to where we are as a church.
- Please open your Bible's to Hebrews 13 and keep them open there, as we will going back there a lot today.

- If you do not have a bible, there is one in the seat in front of you, please take it home with you as our gift to you.

The Context of Hebrews 13:

- First, let's bring a little context to this passage...
- Basically, the author of Hebrews is writing to church members about how to interact church leadership...
 - *What you should look for in leaders.*
 - *What you should listen for in leaders.*
 - *And practical advice for the church on how we can best operate together.*
- **We are going to read Hebrews 13:7-18:**
 - So as Dr. Poplin asked you many times to do... I am going to ask you to stand for the reading of God's Word:

⁷ Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. ⁸ Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

⁹ Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings. It is good for our hearts to be strengthened by grace, not by ceremonial foods, which are of no value to those who eat them. ¹⁰ We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat.

¹¹ The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp. ¹² And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. ¹³ Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. ¹⁴ For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.

¹⁵ Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess his name. ¹⁶ And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.

¹⁷ Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.

¹⁸ Pray for us. We are sure that we have a clear conscience and desire to live honorably in every way.

You may be seated...

Leaders Point You to Christ:

- As we go back to verse 7, I would argue it is the single greatest verse on leadership in the single best chapter on leadership in the Bible...
 - I encourage you to memorize, know and love this verse...
 - It is worth highlighting in your Bible...
 - ⁷ Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.*

- So what is the leader doing here???
- He is speaking the word of Christ...
- And he is living the word of Christ...
- And you don't just look at his life... You look at the fruit of his life...
 - Or as the author says, the "outcome" of his way of life...
- **This is at the core of Christian leadership.**
- So the first lesson on Christian leadership is clear and simple... And that is...
 - Christian Leaders **Point You to Christ.**
- It is also important to note that Christian Leadership is **conditional leadership!**
 - The only unconditional leadership is Christ himself...
- From a church leadership perspective though:
 - **You only follow a leader inasmuch as they are**
 - **Teaching the Word of Christ correctly,**
 - **and Living the Word of Christ correctly...**
- If someone is not teaching Christ and living Christ, you don't follow them...
 - If they are, you can...
 - That is why the author says in verse 9:
 - ***⁹ Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings.***
- Again, the point of Christian Leadership is pointing people to Christ!
 - And that is exactly what Carmel Baptist Church has been so blessed to receive for the last 21 and a half years under Wayne Poplin...
 - How many times did you hear him say ***"It's all about the cross..."***
 - *Or exemplify the character of Christ with his life...*
- Did Dr. Poplin do it perfectly right every time?? **Probably not.**
 - Will Pastor Alex get it right every time?? **Probably not.**
- But the question you must ask yourself is:
 - Did he consistently point you to Christ in both Word and Deed?? **YES!**

Leaders Change, Jesus Doesn't:

- Next, as we move on to verse 8, which at first glance seems like a strange follow up to verse 7. But it is not... It says...
 - ***⁸ Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.***
- In fact, we glean a very good lesson from verse 8, specifically related to the transition we are going through... And it is this:
 - **No matter the transition in leaders we may go through – Jesus is the same yesterday and today and forever...**
- Again, let me be clear and concise here: **Leaders Change, Jesus Doesn't.**
 - **This is the single greatest encouragement I can give you during this time of transition...**
 - That in the midst of the constant change we are under, we have the assurance the unchanging nature of Christ.
 - He can always be relied on.
 - He will never leave you, nor forsake you...

Leaders are Faithful

- **Next, Leaders Model the Faithfulness of Christ.**

- Christian leadership is tested over the long haul...
 - It is measured not in weeks and months, but years and decades...
- It is for this reason, that week in and week out, Dr. Poplin preached Christ, crucified and risen.
 - You know it was so such an honor to sit with Dr. Poplin each week during our sermon prep meetings, brainstorming creative ways to present Christ is such a way that it could be applied to the different aspects of your lives.
 - **His faithfulness to this gospel message was unchanging...**
- When Dr. P and I would meet one on one for mentorship in his office, he would encourage me to do the same:
 - ***“Rob, you preach the cross... That’s it...”***
 - It is the only message that can transform a heart from death to life...
 - Christ is the only constant in the midst of change.
 - He is who we hold on to, when the waters are rising and the world is crashing in around you.
 - When you don’t think you can go on another day.
 - When you suffer a loss, or a death, or an unmet expectation.
- That we have a great redeemer, who lives and is reigning right now over His church, seated at the right hand of the Father in all majesty and glory.
 - Who is the only ONE that is worthy of our honor and glory and praise.
- Friends, this is the legacy Wayne Poplin leaves our church.

Dr. Poplin Retirement Celebration:

- And that is why tonight, we are coming together to celebrate Dr. Poplin’s ministry of over 40 years in the pastorate...
- But I want you to think about this...
 - Tonight, as we celebrate Dr. Poplin’s ministry,
 - What we are really celebrating ***his faithfulness to Christ.***
- As I looked through the agenda for tonight’s celebration, I was amazed at the impact that this man has had over his 21 and half years at Carmel.
 - The thousands upon thousands of lives that have been impacted,
 - Not just because of Wayne Poplin,
 - But because of his faithfulness to Christ and him yielding his life to the Holy Spirit to be used in a mighty way...
 - Tonight is not just a service to honor Wayne Poplin,
 - Tonight is a service to worship Christ!
- It is clear that God has honored the faithfulness of Wayne Poplin.
 - And the fruit of his life and ministry will have ripple effects for generations to come.

Leaders Finish Well

- Which leads to my next leadership point:
- **Part of being Modeling the Faithfulness of Christ is Leaders Finish Well.**
- I know there were many times over the past few years that were difficult for Dr. Poplin.
 - He could have easily hung it up early... He could have coasted...
 - But he didn't.
 - He remained faithful to the call that God had given him...
 - And that is what you should want in leadership...
- Two weeks ago, on his **last Sunday**, I watched two of the three hours that Dr. Poplin preached, and it was so bittersweet at times.
 - Through my teary eyes, I saw the tears welling up in many of your eyes as he was sharing from his heart...
 - But my tears really came the Thursday before he preached.
 - Being a part of his preaching team, I get a copy of his sermon script early, in case something happens and he needs a fill it.
- And as I read through his sermon script, I came to the very last line of the final sermon he would preach before retiring after 40+ years... and I felt my heart sink to my knees and a lump in my throat. And I quote...
 - *“Paul, in that farewell message to the Ephesian elders, said that he had preached to both Jew and Gentile to turn to God in repentance and have faith in Jesus Christ. I call you to that one last time. “*
 - That is it! That is what you want to hear!
 - That is what Christian leaders do...
 - That is how he started his career. And that is how he finished...
 - That is what it means to Finish Well... So good!

Leaders Model the Humility of Christ:

- **Next, Leaders Model the Humility of Christ:**
- In verses 11-14 of Hebrews 13, the author talks about how Jewish High Priest's would make a sin offering of blood, but the bodies of the animals were burned outside the city gates...
 - And that Jesus, our High Priest made a sin offering with his own blood and he was crucified outside the city gates...
 - And that when Jesus was crucified on cross, he bore the shame of our sin with him...
- Remember that the cross was not just an instrument of death and torture...
 - ***It was instrument of humiliation...***
 - So when we live like Christ, it means sharing in this humiliation or as the author of Hebrews states: *We bear the disgrace he bore...*
- That is why the Apostle Paul commends Christians, especially Christian leaders, to follow Christ's example of humility as he writes in **Philippians...**

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves... ..Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, ...

- Again, **Leaders Model the Humility of Christ...**

Wayne / Don Illustration:

- As I served with Dr. Poplin over these past few years, one thing that I have loved watching is how he and Dr. Don Bouldin, our former senior pastor before Dr. Poplin, would interact together...
 - Just so you know... Two senior pastors of the same church serving on the same staff together at the same time is quite frankly unheard of...
 - That speaks to the character and humility of each man...
- And as a young leader, I used to love when the three of us would meet in Wayne's office...
 - Listening to them both stressing the intentionality of reaching the next generation for Christ...
 - There was no pride between them...
 - Just mutual respect and admiration, Friendship...
 - And a shared mission to glorify Christ.
- Sometimes, when men reach a place of such heightened spiritual authority, they let it go to their heads and they start to believe their own hype...
 - And you wonder whose Kingdom they are trying to build.
- Not the case with Dr. Poplin...
 - I have loved serving with a man who didn't think too highly of himself...
 - Who was just one of the guys...
 - We all go to lunch every Monday and I loved the way Wayne would always lead the charge out the door...
 - Lets go... I'm driving...
- And when I think of the humility of leaders, it is just another reason why I am so excited about Pastor Alex coming to Carmel...
 - He has already shown his humility, transparency and approachability.
- I love what he said at the Q&A session we had with him last Saturday...
 - *That being a mega church pastor does not mean you have to be a CEO...*
 - *That he firmly believes someone can be a big church pastor and still be an approachable shepherd with an open door policy.*
 - These are the marks of true shepherds...

Leaders Answer to God:

- And because Christian leaders model the humility of Christ, we can freely follow them... Or as the author of Hebrews writes:

17 Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.

- In our culture today, the word submission really gets a very bad wrap...
 - We think of the word as making you less than someone...
 - It is clearly counter-culture to submit in anything...
- But submission to Godly leadership is freeing, not binding...
 - The scripture is clear that Christian leaders are placed in positions of spiritual authority by God
- Some of you think that we chose Pastor Alex to be our new Senior Pastor last week... I assure you that is not the case...
 - We did not pick Pastor Alex...
 - And the Pastor Selection Committee did not pick Pastor Alex...
 - **Jesus Did!!!**
- Paul says in Ephesians that Christ gave those to be Apostles, Prophets, Evangelist, **Pastors** and Teachers...
 - Therefore, we did not pick Pastor Alex, we simply affirmed the call of Christ on his life...
- And because Christian leaders are picked by God...
 - **Christian leaders have to Answer to God for how they lead.**
 - That is why the author of Hebrews writes:
 - *They keep watch over you as men who must give an account.*
- Remember, we already established that Christian Leadership is conditional leadership.
- We can follow inasmuch as they are:
 - **Speaking the word of Christ correctly...**
 - **And Living the word of Christ correctly...**
 - If they are doing that, you can freely come under their leadership.
 - Not because of them, but because of Christ!!!!
- This means that sometimes leaders might make decisions that you may not agree with...
 - but please know that is not done out of spite for you...
 - but out of love for you and obedience to Christ...
 - It required a tremendous amount of prayer, and seeking God's Word, and listening to wise counsel.
 - But ultimately, it meant listening to Holy Spirit and then having to make the hard call.
 - That is Christian Leadership.
 - And when that decision is made, it not only better for you to submit to it, but it is freeing for you to submit to it because you can trust it, knowing the leader is responsible to God for it!!!
- Which is why I am pretty sure the author of Hebrews writes in verse 18...

18 Pray for us. We are sure that we have a clear conscience and desire to live honorably in every way.

- The author here is asking you to pray for Him... A Pastor...
 - We need your support and prayer...
 - This job is hard.
 - I will be honest with you, I had no idea what I was getting myself into when God called me into the pastorate.
 - The weight of spiritual responsibility is none like I have experienced anywhere else.
- That is why we need your prayer...
 - And we need your support...

Christian Leaders Are Surrendered to Christ:

- Okay, one last lesson from Hebrews 13...
 - And that is this... Christian Leaders **Are Surrendered to Christ.**
- I love the word **surrender**, but I fear it has been given the same bad wrap as the word submission...
 - People immediately think of surrendering as giving up...
 - Like surrendering in a battle...
 - Which, by the way, is the exact reason why I love this word so much.
 - A leader that has fully surrendered his heart and life to Christ, realizes that he can't do it on his own...
 - And lets be honest... This is the way the world works.
 - We are such control freaks that we think that if I just try harder, and pick myself up by the bootstraps, that everything will work out...
- So what do we do???
 - We either heap expectations on each other,
 - or we heap expectations on ourselves...
 - In an attempt to somehow gain a better standing before God or man...
 - By the way, ***the Bible calls this Law.***
 - Today, we call this ***Legalism...***
 - And what happens is that we can't keep the law...
 - We tire out and then we eventually burn out...
 - The weight of expectations is simply too much to bear...
 - ***Can anyone else relate to what I am saying?***
- And it is right here, that the author of Hebrews says something very interesting to us compulsive "Law Keepers"...
 - In verse 10, he writes: *It is good for our hearts to be strengthened by grace, not by ceremonial foods,*
 - *It is good to be strengthened by grace, not ceremonial foods.*
- These ceremonial foods are a reference to the Law of Moses.
 - Or rules by which people used to keep in order to gain righteousness in the sight of God and man...

- But the author here is trying to stress that this is not our source of strength...
 - But that we are strengthened by God's grace and love that has been lavished upon us in Christ...
 - And when we are surrendered to that love, God is our strength...
 - Or as the scriptures tell us, *when we are weak, he is strong...*
 - *That His power is perfected in our weakness...*
 - And when a leader has surrendered to this love of God in Christ, we call grace, you will see in the fruit of their lives...
- And this has been such an honor to see lived out in Wayne Poplin, as the fruit of his life and ministry so clearly display...

Meeting Alex:

- And I saw this same surrender in the eyes of Pastor Alex the very first time I met him, which was the weekend he was the secret shopper...
 - Although in fairness, I didn't know what it was I was seeing at the time...
- As many of you heard, if you were at the business meeting last Saturday, Pastor Alex came as a secret shopper the day the children led us in worship a couple months ago.
- And if you heard his story, he had been driving around the church, through the neighborhoods, and praying in the parking lot, asking God to speak to his heart.
 - *Asking God, is this where you are leading me???*
- And during the worship time, the children led us in a song called "*I Will Follow*"
 - The song goes,
 - *Where you go, I'll go...*
 - *Where you stay, I'll stay*
 - *When you move, I'll move...*
 - *I will follow...*
- And when he heard this, tears filled his eyes, because God spoke to him in that moment.
 - God had called him to Carmel at that very moment.
 - And that is when he got up and started filming with his iPad...
- And it was right after that, that I met him in the Gathering Space...
 - And so when he walked up to me, I could tell there was something really going on inside this guy immediately just by the look in his eyes...
- And don't get me wrong... It wasn't weird, it was awesome...
 - He said to me... "*Are you Rob?*" "*I am Rob...*"
 - There was something strangely compelling about him.
 - He told me his name was Alex... and he was from Texas...
 - And then I said, do we know each other Alex?
 - And he said, "*It sure feels like it...*"
 - "*It sure does*"
 - I asked if everything was okay...
 - He said it was, but he didn't really want to answer.

- And the thing is, he had been told not to talk to staff but he was overcome with the moment that he just saw me and came up to me.
- I tried to ask him more questions... But he realized he wasn't supposed to be talking to me...
- The thing is, my heart really went out to him... Because of what I saw.
 - I was asking him do you need to talk to a pastor...
 - Can I pray with you???
- And then he said, *"I am so sorry to be so cryptic, but I have to quit talking now..."* "Okay..."
- *Well Alex, can I at least ask how you knew my name???*
 - *He said he saw me on the website and that he had to meet me...*
 - *Okay Alex... It is really good to meet you.*
 - *Are you sure you don't want to talk to someone???*
- So I go to lunch with Ani after church that day and I told her what happened...
 - I told her we really need to be praying for Alex...
 - I was really impacted by this interaction...
 - And so Ani and I were sitting there trying to figure out what might be going on with him...
 - He is from Texas... He is just visiting... No family at the church...
 - He saw you on the website and said that he had to meet...
 - He was emotional...
 - Then Ani says, I got it...
 - Maybe Alex saw one of your sermons online, accepted Christ and he had to fly out to Charlotte to meet you...
 - That is definitely it!!!
 - I love my wife!
 - BTW - If you ever want to know how to encourage a pastor... that is it!

The Rest of the Story:

- So the rest of the story became clear the next day when Mark Collins came to elders and explained what had happened...
- And then everything came into clarity...
 - What I had witnessed the day before was a man whose heart was about to explode out of his chest because the Holy Spirit of God just rocked his universe...
 - I saw in his eyes a man that had been deeply moved by God.
 - And to **not** follow would have been disobedient...
- And just like we have had with Wayne Poplin, I saw in the eyes of Alex Kennedy a man who will **humbly, faithfully point us to Christ.**
 - A man who understands that he **answers to God.**
 - And I have no doubt will **finish well...**
- A man who is fully **surrendered to Christ...**

- Who understands he doesn't have to live by a set of obligations but by the Christ in him...
 - That is what he is called to and that is what we are all called to...
- Let us **not** be a church that Heaps Law on one another,
 - **But let us be a church that is strengthened by Grace!!!!**
 - And offers grace freely to each others as Christ has to us...
- For God sent the Law into the world to show us our need for Grace...
 - A grace that comes only in Christ...
 - Because at our cores, we are all lawbreakers.
 - And the penalty of the law is death.
 - That is what the law does... it brings death.
- But Jesus Christ, was the **ONLY** one that was able to keep the righteous obligations of law, and because of that, we are no longer under the law.
 - But He has set free from the curse of the Law...
 - **And we now live under grace.**
- ***⁸ For it is by **grace** you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.***
- Or as the Apostle Paul would say in Galatians:
 - ¹⁹ For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. ²⁰ I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. ²¹ I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!"***
- This is the core, central message of the gospel...
 - This is the message true Christian leaders and pastors preach...
- So let us be a people that is strengthened by this message of grace...
 - That we might be a people fully surrendered to the love of God in Christ...
 - And a people who are reconciled to God and each other...
- These are exciting days at Carmel Baptist Church...
 - I pray that you are ready for what is to come...

Closing Blessing:

- You know the book of Hebrews was written as a series of sermons to be read to the early church...
 - So today, let me finish with the final blessing the author gave to his church 2000 years ago... NOW...
 - ²⁰ May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, ²¹ equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.***
- **Would you pray with me...**