

“Pouring my heart out to a stranger” – Taylor Swift : A Lesson in Letting Your Guard Down

A sob escaped my lips. My mom’s voice turned into a buzz in my earbuds. I was completely and utterly alone. It was homecoming weekend back home and I was sitting on a rock in the dark, 516 miles away from home. What started as just a little homesick feeling escalated into a full blown meltdown. I was spiraling. Not even a phone call home to mom could pull me out of my head. I felt hopeless, alone, and forgotten. “Are you ok?” At first I wasn’t sure if the voice was real. I pulled my face out of my hands. I looked up and in front of me stood a six-foot-two complete stranger. He wore headphones around his neck and had stopped in front of the rock where I sat. In my head I said “I’m totally fine. Nothing to see here. No need to burden a stranger with my problems.” But what escaped my mouth instead was a sobbed “no.”

What the stranger did next I will hold in my heart forever. He asked me if I needed a hug, and in an uncharacteristic move I said yes. I expected him to leave after that. Instead he sat down on the rock with me. While I was busy wiping the snot from my nose with the sleeve of my hoodie, he explained the crazy turn of events that had brought him to me. He explained how he was having a bad day. His roommates had friends over and he felt overwhelmed. He decided to go on a walk to clear his head and work out his own problems. As he was walking one way he told me he felt clearly as if someone had told him he needed to go the other way. He explained how he didn’t want to turn around. He felt frustrated because he just wanted to be alone. All he wanted to do was listen to music with his headphones. The feeling hit him again and he relented. Then he saw me sitting all alone, and begrudgingly told himself that if I was crying he would stop and take his headphones off. He told me he knew the Lord had turned him around. Through this prompting the Lord sent him to help me.

He sat with me for an hour, listening to my worries, sadness, and loneliness, meeting every comment with a supporting gaze and asking follow up questions. He validated my feelings and calmed me down out of my spiral. He listened. Truly listened. We connected over our shared experience with struggles, unexpected life circumstances, and physical challenges that come as a result of our mortal bodies. The next morning I received a text from him expressing “The Lord loves you so much, He knows your heart and name. Don’t forget that!” I can honestly say I’ve never been “the one” before this experience. I’m almost always pulled together, and strictly adhere to the “fake it till you make it” mantra. I don’t process emotions with other people and I certainly don’t cry on a stranger’s shoulder. I always strive to find “the one” not be “the one.” That day my composure slipped and the Lord sent someone to my rescue.

In the past I’ve always aimed to find “the one.” I’ve always been the rescuer, not the rescued. I’ve found a deep purpose in connecting with the unseen, underserved, and undervalued. I’ve missed a calc exam to attend the funeral of a dear friend’s mother, left my group of friends to sit with people sitting alone at lunch, taught the life saving skill of swimming to those with differing abilities, jumped headfirst into coaching special olympic flag football, spent senior prom with an overwhelmed acquaintance experiencing sensory difficulties and sat with crying teammates in the locker room. I have never served just to log hours. I serve because I love it, and because in doing so I feel closer to my Savior. In looking for others more lonely than myself I have found a place for myself in this world.

It is for this reason that someone stopping struck me so dearly. Having both ministered to and been “the one,” I know both the stupendous joy that comes from service and the gut wrenching low of being “the one”. This experience reminded me that God remembers me: I’m never truly alone. It struck me then that I, as a leader, didn’t always have to have everything

together. It was ok for me to not be ok. As a leader it's necessary to take care of yourself too. One cannot have the answers all the time, and that's why the Gospel is so incredible. That's what makes the Christ-Centered Leadership Model so important. What I love about the model is that it includes God, God's children, stewardship, AND self. It's important to serve those around you and recognize that every person on this earth is a child of God. But sometimes, despite everything, we will find ourselves as "the one". In the service of others we cannot forget ourselves completely. The Christ-Centered Leadership Model highlights that we must "express love for myself" and "accept the Savior's grace." The two greatest commandments are "love thy God" and "love thy neighbor as thyself." Within these I've always believed in a third, unspoken, commandment: "love yourself." In learning to embrace our own spiritual gifts and leaning on the Savior's grace, we can become better leaders and people. To have a love and appreciation for yourself allows you to appreciate and love others around you. To love yourself is to have the capability to better love those you lead. I learned to better express love to myself through this experience and in turn how to give those who look to me the same grace.

Often ministering to "the one" isn't the easy thing to do. No one is making you do it. Our gift of agency means we don't actually have to ever step outside of ourselves: it's a choice. The Christ-Centered Leadership Model encourages both self care and stepping outside ourselves in serving others through expressing love, honoring agency, and inviting accountability. In my above example it would have been so easy for the stranger to keep walking like most people that night. But he chose, because of his agency, to stop and help me even though it was inconvenient for him. As leaders we should all strive to sacrifice in order to better help those around us. After all, how can we truly lead if we don't get to know the background and perspectives of those around us? Stepping outside yourself is never the easy thing to do; as we do we build a

community and team that is better able to conquer anything that it faces. To quote the learning model, “to truly lead like the Lord we must listen intently and demonstrate empathy.” It does no one any good if we all walk around thinking only about ourselves.

If sobbing on the arm of a stranger taught me anything it is that God has a plan for each and every one of us. We are never truly alone. God has a plan for everyone. We simply have to trust in Him and when needs be, listen to the promptings He sends our way. This is another key aspect of the Christ-Centered Leadership Model. Sometimes prayers aren’t always answered the way we would like. I remember praying that day to meet new people. Never in my mind would this have involved spilling my life story to a stranger. Never would I have guessed the Lord was preparing someone—who otherwise I would never have run into—to come to my rescue.

Seeking guidance from the Lord is important, but even more so is being open to what He has in store. In order to lead as He would, we need to first open our minds to plans bigger than anything we could have come up with on our own. The Lord sees things from an Eternal perspective. He thinks bigger and more long term than we ever could. As we lead as He would, we strive to align our wills and plans with Him. We must, like the brother of Jared, be prepared to ask God to touch metaphorical rocks in our life and be willing to follow when He has specific asks from us. We must cling to Him in our uncertainty and we must trust that He will lead us out of our own metaphorical wilderness of life.

The difficult reality of mortal life as a leader is we will inevitably fall short. We are not perfect beings. As leaders we will inevitably fail to delegate, communicate, or empathize with the people around us. We may find ourselves contending with a teammate, micromanaging a project, or lacking in humility. The beautiful thing is that God knew this would happen before we even stepped foot on earth. According to Elder Robbins, “Repentance isn’t His backup plan in

the event we might fail. Repentance Is His plan, knowing that we will” (Apr 2018, “Until Seventy Times Seven”). We can become better people and leaders as we rely on the Grace of God when we inevitably fall short. Repentance is His plan so that, if by some chance we do more damage than good for “the one,” we can be forgiven and learn to do better.

The Christ-Centered Leadership Model combines all these things into one complete circle, where no one aspect is more important than the other. One of my favorite sayings is “God cannot drive a parked car.” We must, as leaders, be prepared to start driving and bear in mind that God may have us take a different road than what we originally anticipated. Ultimately, to be a good leader we must seek to find a balance between listening and taking care of ourselves, others, and God. As we strive to become like Christ, we will gradually begin to lead as He would, a process beautifully summarized in the Christ-Centered Leadership Model.