

God Servers¹

A Sermon on Being Called by God to Ordained Office
The Rev. Whit Malone
Springdale Presbyterian Church, Louisville, Kentucky
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1 Corinthians 12:4-11

4 Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; 5 and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; 6 and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. 7 To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. 8 To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, 9 to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, 10 to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. 11 All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

Imitating Christ's Humility (Philippians 2:1-8)

2 If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, 2 make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. 3 Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. 4 Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. 5 Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, 7 but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, 8 he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

Today's sermon is the second in a series of three on the *expectations* we have of each other around here. Last Sunday, Jean shared some of her expectations, as a pastor, of you, church members. This morning we will talk mostly about what it means to be *called* by God to ordained office in the church. And then next week, I will share with you my take on what you can expect of Jean and me as pastors and all of those who are ordained to church office.

¹ From "A Proposal for Considering the Theology and Practice of Ordination in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 1992,

I want to emphasize that everything Jean said last Sunday and everything I say this morning is steeped in the words of three particular books:

- the *Book of Order*, one part of our church's *Constitution*
- the *Book of Confessions*, the other part of our church's *Constitution*
- and most important, the Bible on which these other two books are based

When we Presbyterians begin to talk about what we expect of each other, this is where we start—with these three books. And we do that because we believe that through these three books we will come to a deeper understanding of what God expects of us.

Now, I can think of at least two good reasons to talk about expectations. First, in terms of our relationships with each other, it's just the healthy thing to do. Just like in any marriage, family, or other grouping of human beings, getting expectations out there and on the table is the healthy thing to do. And this is particularly true in a church like Springdale because:

- we come from a variety of church backgrounds (some of us don't really have a church background);
- we come from all across the generational spectrum and, believe me, the generation you are in greatly influences your expectations;
- and because most of us are new to this church in the past ten or twelve years and thus we haven't had time to establish a "culture" in which our expectations are clearly agreed upon.

So relationally, this is a good thing to do.

The second reason to talk about expectations is that, as a congregation, we're focusing right now on our norms—our ways of doing things around here. The expectations we have of each other are really just another way of talking about our norms.

Jean did a very fine job last week articulating what she expects of church members and I want to recap for you what I heard her saying. I heard two main points in her message. First, that being a member of the church of Jesus Christ means first and foremost *following* Jesus—being his disciple, learning from him, obeying him, and trying to live like him. Second, that Jean expects members of a church to actually be active *participants* in that church. Because following Jesus Christ *could be* interpreted as a solitary journey. It could be seen as mainly a personal spiritual quest for which one needs only a Bible and a prayer closet. Lots of folks think that. Yet, Jean emphasized something that those of us who are studying the book of Acts in Sunday school are just beginning to understand: for the Christian, active participation in the community of faith is not a matter of choice. For the New Testament Christian, participating in Christ's church is not optional. And knowing that, we as your pastors expect you to actively participate in the life of this church.

This morning I want to share one more expectation that we, as pastors, have of you, our members. And it is this: that you will take seriously your responsibility to elect officers for this

church.² One of the responsibilities of church membership, in addition to coming to worship; in addition to giving generously of your time, talent, and treasure; in addition to trying to live a Christ-like life; it is your responsibility as a member of this church to elect and ordain its officers, its leaders. For the next few minutes I want to talk with you about this responsibility. And to do this I think we first need to talk about ordination. What exactly is ordination? Why do we do it? Who qualifies for it?

I begin with a confession—an admission really. When it comes to the election and ordination of persons to office in the church, I admit that we Presbyterians sound as if we're talking out of both sides of our mouth. We sound as if we're confused. For example, we believe that each Christian, in baptism, is essentially "ordained" to ministry (that all Christian believers are, in a very real sense, "ministers"). Yet some of us get sort of a second "ordination" to be ministers, or elders, or deacons. What's that about?

We say that we believe in the "priesthood of all believers." It's one of the essential tenets of our Reformed faith. And what we mean by that is that you do not need Jean or me to be your priest. You don't need us to go in between you and God. Through Jesus Christ, by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, you can approach God directly. Through Jesus Christ, by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, you can act as priests to one another. That's what we claim to believe. Yet how many of us act as if we believe it?

When it comes to ordination, we *say* that the only difference between elders and ministers is the *function* they perform in the church; that in terms of power and authority they're completely equal; and that within the church no one person is more important than another. Yet in practice, it seems as though we have at least two, if not three, classes of people in the church: the members in one class, the elders and deacons in another, and the ministers in still another. My experience is that, in practice, we don't really see or act with each other as equals.

So I admit we come off as being a bit fuzzy when it comes to ordination. For the average person who doesn't sit around thinking about this stuff all day, it can be very confusing. Well, I don't think I can clear anything up without admitting yet another fuzzy place in our understanding of church—this whole notion of *call*.

We use that word—call—a lot around here. At least I'm aware I do. We talk about the role of the Holy Spirit in calling persons to a relationship with Christ. In worship I'm always praying for us to become the kind of persons God calls us to be. We ask the folks who are nominated to be elders to consider whether God might be calling them to this service. Seventeen months ago, we extended a call to Jean Davidson to become our associate pastor. We use the word call a lot, and that's good. The more of life we see as God's calling, the better. But I'm also aware that call can mean a lot of different things, and that can be very confusing.

To help us think more clearly about ordination I want us to take just a minute to think more clearly about *God's call* in our lives. Let's look briefly at three dimensions of that.³ The *most*

² Book of Order, G-6.0102

³ From "A Proposal for Considering the Theology and Practice of Ordination in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 1992, p. 28-29.

basic meaning of call is the *call to be a Christian*. Jesus called his disciples by saying just two little words, “Follow me.” This is how all of us first enter the church. God has come to each and every one of us, loved us, forgiven our sins, and invited us into a lifelong, life-giving relationship. The first dimension of call is the call to be a Christian—to follow Jesus Christ.

A second dimension of call is the *call to actually serve God’s purposes—to devote one’s life to serving Jesus by serving others in his name*. In the Gospel of John, we read that once Jesus has invited the disciples to follow him, he then sends them out. He says, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” This is the call to become God servers! This is the call to become ministers on God’s behalf. And this is also the call to become active, contributing members of the body of Christ, the church.

For the next several months our middle school youth will be engaged in confirmation class. At the end of their class, sometime next spring, this second dimension of call, the call to become God servers, will be set before them—and they will be asked to decide.

Finally, the third dimension of call is the *call to a particular service or ministry at a particular time and place*. For some this may lead to ordination (in the Presbyterian church we ordain folks to three offices—elder, deacon, and minister of Word and Sacrament). But not all who are called to particular ministries are ordained. More and more, the church is commissioning missionaries and lay pastors to a particular ministry. The important thing to remember is that ordination and commissioning are always related to the needs of the church for *leadership*.

Because the church needs leaders just like any other human organization, it needs people to be responsible for things. In the church’s case, it needs people to make sure that the things Jesus has given us to do get done.

Now, you may have noticed that the first two calls are blanket calls—they’re issued to every Christian. The call to follow Jesus and the call to serve his purposes in the world go out to all believers. Yet the third call—the call to ordained office—is issued to just a few. What determines who’s in the third group? Who qualifies? And what do we expect of those we ordain to lead us in the church

Well, you’ll be happy to hear that those are the questions we’ll address next Sunday as we close out this series. I would like to leave you this morning pondering some words from our *Book of Order* that I think are particularly relevant.

First this: “All ministry in the church is a gift from Jesus Christ. Members and officers alike [that’s all of us] serve mutually under the mandate of Jesus Christ who is the chief minister of all. His ministry is the basis of all ministries; the standard for all offices is the pattern of the one who came ‘not to be served but to serve.’”⁴ I chose to read the passage from Philippians this morning because the model for all elected, ordained leaders in the church is the humble, self-emptying, God-serving model of our Lord.

⁴ G – 6.0101 and Matthew 28:20

Finally, regarding those ordained to the office of elder: “As there were in Old Testament times elders for the government of the people, so the New Testament Church provided persons with particular gifts to share in governing and ministry. Elders should be persons of faith, dedication and good judgment. Their manner of life should be a demonstration of the Christian gospel, both within the church and in the world.”⁵

Would that those words could be said of all of us: “their manner of life is a demonstration of the Christian gospel.”

Amen.

¹ “A Proposal for Considering the Theology and Practice of Ordination in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.),” 1992

² *Book of Order*, G-6.0102

³ “A Proposal for Considering the Theology and Practice of Ordination in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.),” 1992

⁴ *Book of Order*, G-6.0101 and Matthew 28:20

⁵ *Book of Order*, G-6.0301 and 6.0303

⁵ G – 6.0301 and 6.0303