

Set Apart to Minister

Then Peter began to speak to them: 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.

-- Acts 10:34-38

On the occasion of the ordination of Phil Rastle:

It might seem a little strange to have an ordination after Phil has been serving so long as pastor of this congregation. This ceremony doesn't change his status in any way; it won't make him funnier or smarter or better looking. That Phil is called to ministry is something God made clear years ago, so this ceremony doesn't reveal any new information about him. People whom God has called to ministry minister whether they're recognized or not, whether they're formally certified or not, whether they've got a long string of initials after their names or not. When God calls, servants just get on with the job. If you want to know why we're really here today, it is to celebrate one of those servants.

That isn't to say that it won't make any difference; it will make things just a little easier for Phil to have this credential. He'll be able to celebrate marriages and he'll have an easier time gaining entrance to certain parts of the hospital. He will even be allowed to make his income taxes more complicated. But perhaps the biggest difference will be in the knowledge that the ministry God has called him to is recognized and affirmed: it's one thing to believe in your heart that God has called you to do it, and it's another thing, an important thing, for the church and the community to acknowledge it. As far as we're concerned, Phil, you've been a fully-fledged pastor for a very long time, and it's about time your credentials caught up with your life.

That being the case, it wouldn't appropriate for me to use the sermon to try to tell you what ministry is like; you've been doing it all along, you know what it's like. What I'd like to do instead is to talk about some of the larger aspects of ministry: not the pastor's role, but the church's role with the pastor as part of the church.

You've probably heard this story from Acts about Cornelius the Roman Centurion. Remember that when the story begins, Cornelius is neither a Christian nor a Jew. He is, however, a devout man; somehow he has come to believe in God, and he prays regularly. He's also a kind and generous man; for a Roman soldier, he isn't so bad. I think it's interesting to note that God speaks to him even though Cornelius hasn't yet been introduced to the Christian faith. And God does speak to him. God tells him to send for Peter, whom he has never heard of before, and even tells him where Peter is staying.

In the meantime, God speaks to Peter as well. Peter is a Jewish Christian. He has always kept the law, as best he can, which means that he never knowingly eats food that would be considered unclean according to the Law, and doesn't eat or keep company with people who don't observe the Law. Eating with Gentiles, in other words, would have been a double-whammy for Simon Peter. Nevertheless, as he's praying on the roof one day, waiting for lunch, Peter has a vision in which a blanket is lowered three times by its four corners, and the blanket is just full of everything an observant Jew is not allowed to eat: "all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air." In the vision, a voice said, "Arise, Peter, kill and eat," and of course Peter refuses, saying, "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean." The voice then said, "Don't call anything unclean that God has made clean."

Just about this time, the messengers sent by Cornelius arrive. The Holy Spirit tells Peter to go with them, and when he finally gets to Cornelius, they're all amazed at this turn of events. God sent someone who ordinarily would have crossed the street to

avoid Gentiles. The passage Jane read a few minutes ago is Peter's explanation: "'I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right. You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached— how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.'"

One of the things we human beings as a group aren't especially good at is avoiding favoritism. There are some people we just like better than others; there are some people we'd rather be with than others; there are some groups we'd rather be associated with than others; there are some folks we'd rather make friends with than others. Maybe it can't be helped, but it seems to me this passage raises an uncomfortable possibility: the Good News is for everyone. We aren't allowed to pick who gets to receive God's grace and who doesn't. The Bible is clear that the mission of the church is to proclaim the Good News, and to do it without respect to who's listening.

Ted Engstrom once wrote of a Christian businessman who traveled to various mission fields around the world. One day he found himself in northern India near a leprosarium. Outside the walls of this leprosarium he saw an unusual sight: a lovely young missionary nurse was attending to the needs of a filthy, leprous beggar, ministering to him as he was about to be admitted to the leprosarium. This sight distressed the man terribly; the businessman had his camera around his neck, but he couldn't shoot any film. He paused at the sight, then withdrew a few feet. Tears filled his eyes and he said, "Young lady, I wouldn't do that for a million dollars." Quickly she turned to him and said, "Sir, neither would I."

Such is ministry: every act of kindness is an expression of God's grace, and it proclaims the Good News in a way that words can't do justice. It is what God calls churches and pastors to do. It is why we're set apart, all of us, to do ministry. We are to celebrate the grace we have received by reflecting back into the community around us. I don't just mean the Christian community, either: I mean that big, ugly world out there where those people live that make us frightened and nervous. It doesn't matter that we don't always know the right thing to do; we need to do the gracious thing, the compassionate thing, the loving thing, the caring thing; the forbearing thing; the humane thing, the benevolent thing; the merciful thing; the tender thing; we need to do the Jesus thing...even when sometimes we may do what looks like the wrong thing.

If we believe God is at work, then even our mistakes can still be used to spread the good news and to glorify Him.

In his book, *How to be Born Again*, Billy Graham writes: "There is a well-known story of some men in Scotland who had spent the day fishing. One of the fishermen, in a characteristic gesture to describe the size of the fish that got away, slung out his hands just as the little waitress was getting ready to set the cup of tea at his place. The hand and the teacup collided, dashing the tea against the whitewashed walls. Immediately an ugly brown stain began to spread over the wall. The man who did it was very embarrassed and apologized profusely, but one of the other guests jumped up and said, 'Never mind.' Pulling a pen from his pocket, he began to sketch around the ugly brown stain. Soon there emerged a picture of a magnificent royal stag with his antlers spread. That artist was Sir Edwin Landseer, England's foremost painter of animals.

"This story has always beautifully illustrated to me that fact that if we confess not only our sins but our mistakes to God, He can make out of them something for our good and His glory. Sometimes it's harder to confess our mistakes and stupidities to God than it is our sins. Mistakes and stupidities seem so dumb, whereas sins seem

more or less to be an outcropping of our human nature. But Romans 8:28 tells us that if they are committed to God He can make them work together for our good and His glory.”

As we learn to do ministry together, clergy and laity, ministers and people, pastors and congregants, all of us must remember and respect our calling. Do you remember who first shared the Good News with you? It may or may not have been an ordained minister, but sure was someone who was called by God to share His grace.