

Sermon: February 22, 2009

Scripture: Psalm 50:1-6; Acts 20:13-36; I Peter 5:1-11

Title: "The Challenges and Joys of being an Elder"

Once we have examined some of the qualifications of becoming an Elder, we need to take a long hard look at what is entailed in being an Elder. What are our duties and responsibilities according to scripture. Thanks again to Paul and his words recorded in The book of Acts and in I Peter we have some strong hints of what we need to be about as Elders. But really, are these not things all Christians should be about?

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Call to Worship:

Psalm 50:1-6

Leader: The Mighty One, God, The Lord, speaks and summons the earth  
From the rising of the sun to the place where it sets.

People: From Zion, perfect in beauty, God shines forth.

Leader: Our God comes and will not be silent;

A fire devours before him, and around him a tempest rages.

People: He summons the heavens above, and the earth,

That he may judge his people.

Leader: Gather to me my consecrated ones, who made a covenant

With me by sacrifice.

People: And the heavens proclaim his righteousness,

For God himself is judge.

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Hymns: #482 Praise Ye the Lord, the Almighty

#418 God, Bless Your Church with Strength

#2123 Spirit Now Live in Me

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Prayer of Confession:

Eternal God, we claim to be religious people. We go through the motions of worship Sunday by Sunday. But our worship is often hollow and our expressions of fealty to you are too often left in the pews to wait, like these pew cushions, until we return in seven days to reclaim them. We confess that we are reluctant to carry our worship out of this building and exercise it in our daily walk of life. Forgive our failure of faith. Teach us that Your Gospel is empty unless it is exported from these walls. Give us a new sense of commitment to that Gospel which will move us off dead center and cause us to challenge some of the religious misconceptions that pass as religion in today's world. We pray in the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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Call to Confession: (for Leader)

We live in a world where religion is claimed by many, but practiced by few. We live in a world that is hungry for the Good News of God's Love and Grace, and we feed it

platitudes and cute sayings. Let us confess to God our sinfulness even as we claim His Grace.

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#### Assurance of Pardon

God is gracious and merciful, abounding in steadfast love. God judges, but God also forgives the contrite. The burden of our sin is taken away. Enter into the joy of your freedom in Christ. Rejoin the congregation of the redeemed, in humble service, through Christ. Amen.

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Last week we took a look at the requirements which Paul laid out for Titus as he went about the task of selecting Elders to serve the congregation on Crete. I tried to share with you my understanding of these requirements as being goals toward which we all should strive. None of us ever meets all these requirements. They are the “destination” toward which we journey.

This morning I would like to review challenges and joys of serving God as an Elder in Christ’s Church.

Read: Acts 20:13-38 and I Peter 5:1-11

One of the sad things about the term “Elder” is that it conjures up images of endless meetings. How many times have I suggested to someone that they would make a wonderful Elder to which they responded, “not me, I have no desire to sit in meetings until midnight and head up committees and be responsible for the finances and buildings. No sir, being an Elder is not for me.”

Well, if that is the image one has of being an Elder, I really cannot blame someone for shying away from the responsibility. But the Bible says nothing about sitting through meetings of The Session. As a matter of fact, The Session is a creation of us humans as we seek to do the work of God in an orderly fashion. It is certainly not found in scripture.

What then do we find? We find an image of an Elder who correlates more to a shepherd keeping watch over the flock than to a board member of a fortune 500 corporation. I'd be willing to bet that if we rewarded our Elders the same way that board members at Abbott Laboratories or Proctor and Gamble are rewarded, we wouldn't have any difficulty finding members to fill the class of 2011. But we don't, do we. That's not what we are about.

Paul of Tarsus had an extraordinary life. First as a persecutor of the followers of Jesus of Nazareth and then as the chief exponent of the Good News which Christ came to declare. His missionary journeys cover most of the Mediterranean world of that day. He came into conflict with Jewish leaders as well as Roman authorities. At times he had some differences with those who comprised the early church. Still, it is Paul to whom we turn when we want answers to questions we have about the Church of Christ.

Today we turn to an episode in Acts where Paul is taking leave of his fellow believers in Ephesus. Paul is nearing the end of his third missionary journey. Actually, he is on his way back to Jerusalem. He has visited some of the congregations he had helped to start on his first and second journeys and he is headed back to his starting point. Traveling by ship, he lands in the seaport of Miletus. It lies less than 50 miles south of Ephesus, so he sends for the Elders at Ephesus. He longs to have one last interaction with them. He reminds them of the manner in which he ministered among them, not taking payment and facing hardships, preaching the "whole will of God".

Then he tells them something that will stop them dead in their tracks. "I know that none of you will ever see me again." He is so matter of fact about this. He knows the possibilities that lie before him of persecution and even death. But he does not shy

away. He accepts it all as part of his ministry for Christ. Still he needs to get in one more message to these Elders:

“Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the Church of God.” Then Paul, speaking very bluntly, warns these Elders that after Paul is gone, “savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples .... So be on your Guard!”

Shepherds! That is the best way to describe Elders. We know what shepherds do. Our Lord told stories of shepherds who knew their sheep and their sheep knew the sound of his voice. Christ told parables of the lost sheep and how the shepherd left the flock and hunted until that lost sheep was found. But wrapped up in this thing of Shepherding is the call to be sound in one's own faith and be willing to speak out when you see someone teaching a false doctrine.

Shortly after Elaine and I were married back in '65, we moved to Mt. Storm, W.VA where I became the assistant to Dr. John Hungerland in the Mountain Parish of old Winchester Presbytery. Between us we had five coal mining churches stretching from Davis, W.VA to Kitzmiller Maryland. John lived at the southern end near two of the churches, Davis and Thomas. Elaine and I lived at Mt. Storm and had charge of three congregations, Mt. Storm, Gormaniana and Kitzmiller. Well, these were real mountain people and the population was rather stable. We rarely saw folks move into those mountains. We did see a lot of our children move out. So, when a new family showed up one Sunday at Mt. Storm Church with five children we were excited. A new family right

here on the plateau. Then the wife asked if she could help with Sunday School. We were estatic. She jumped right in and soon had a class going with about 10 to 12 little children in it. Then one Sunday a member of the church came to me and asked, “do you know what Ms. Jones (for the lack of any other name) is teaching?” “Well,” I responded, “I suppose she is teaching the SS curriculum we purchase for that class.”

“Oh no came her reply with a tone of distress in it. “She is a Bahaist, and she is using her own literature.” Well, I did not know what a Bahaiist was. But I soon found out. It is a religion that selects its doctrine from all the world’s religions. It takes some of Christianity, some from Islam, some from Buddahism, some from Shinto... etc.. If you ask a Bahaist what they believe, they will tell you that they believe everything. But the truth is that they do not really believe anything. The end of this story is that the Elders of the Mt. Storm Church had to visit with that dear lady and explain that they could not have anything but Christian doctrine taught to our children. Naturally, we lost her and her family.

Elders are called to be shepherds of the flock and to protect the flock from abervent doctrines that would pull Christians away from the sound doctrines which the Scriptures outline for us. Unchristian doctrine. Unchristian lifestyles. Unchristian ethics. Unchristian behaviors. Elders are shepherds who are vigilant concerning the tenants of the faith and are quick to stop divergent beliefs from being interjected into the flock. Shepherds watch over the flock day and night. Elder shepherds are called to watch over the flock of God’s people day and night. Remember those words to Titus. “Elders should hold fast to the message they have been taught, be able to encourage others in the faith, and be able to refute unsound doctrine.” Titus 1:9

Now the way I understand this, Elder Shepherds need to be constantly studying the Bible and learning more about The Faith for their own edification, making them better able to fulfill their calling to be Good Shepherds of the flock. Elders need to set the example and be in Sunday School and yes, even organize a class and teach the children of the Church the essential elements of our Faith.

Peter picks up this Shepherd theme in his first letter. “Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, serving as overseers – not because you must, but because you are willing.....don’t be greedy; don’t lord it over others.... And, when when the Chief Shepherd appears you will receive the crown of glory.

I’d like to report to you that being an Elder will fill your life with so much fun and joy that you will wonder why you were so reluctant to accept the position. But that may not be exactly how it goes. Shepherding the flock may bring stress and strain. Certainly it will challenge your best skills and challenge your own faith. Figuring out a budget for next year, or deciding on how to care for the building or setting a schedule for Sunday School and taking communion to shut-in are not glorious tasks. Much of being an Elder is everyday humdrum detail.... But so is marriage.

To paraphrase Shakespere “To be an Elder or not to be an Elder, that is the question.”

It is question that only you, the congregation and the Holy Spirit can answer. But if the answer is in the affirmative, I can assure you that you will not be alone. You will become a shepherd of God’s flock and will have the company of a great host of shepherds.

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