

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ

Richard E. Sindall, Pastor

Sermon for the Service of Ordination and Installation of Officers, February 13, 2011

Lessons: Exodus 18:13-18 and Matthew 5:13-16; 6:5-8

LIFE TURNED UPWARD AND OUTWARD

Moses has a wise father-in-law who recognizes the stress of leadership not shared. Moses certainly has no lack of personal responsibility or commitment to God for leading the covenant people and holding them together, but he's wearing himself out and he's frustrating the people who must stand around all day waiting for his attention. The situation is unsustainable. How long before Moses breaks down or the people get fed up and rebel against his leadership? The message is clear, coming to us down through the centuries: even Moses couldn't do it alone!

I searched for two scripture lessons that would give us a balanced picture of church leadership but found I needed three: one for our responsibility to Jesus Christ, another for the importance of sharing that responsibility so it includes many without overburdening a few, and a third to remind us of the spirit in which faith looks upward toward God and outward toward other people. Oops, I left out *inward*. No, I did not. Sin is isolation in the kingdom of self where God and other people are viewed only as enhancements to the self. We become liberated to find, know, and be our true selves as God's Spirit turns us upward toward God and outward toward other people. To know myself in isolation is to be deceived. To find myself in relatedness to God and other people is to become the person I am created to be, free from my imprisonment in the false pride and, therefore, nagging shame of the phony kingdom of self. Only the self that lets itself be loved finds freedom, healing, and life.

Today we install thirteen church officers for terms of service to which they have been elected, and we ordain two of them for the rest of their lives, one as a deacon and one as an elder. What is church leadership, and to what can we compare it? I have an analogy to share with you, an analogy I draw from our recent church housecleaning Saturdays in preparation for hosting January's meeting of West Jersey Presbytery. First of all, the way we did it made work fun, maybe not the kind of fun we'd like every Saturday, but a satisfying and in its own way enjoyable experience. We worked together, but people also took individual initiative going beyond cleaning to enhance the appearance of particular rooms in our church building. Big jobs, like scrubbing the walls throughout the lower level, were done by teams that coordinated themselves. People who took further initiative recruited partners. Some who could not be present on the scheduled days came at other times and did self-assigned jobs that clearly needed to be done. Most importantly, working together enabled us to get the whole

task done quickly and made doing it satisfying because no one got stuck with too much, but no one was left standing around with nothing to do, either.

That's a visioning model: working together but welcoming ideas and initiatives, coordinating the work but not maintaining such tight control that only a few need bother to think, and sharing responsibility so no one gets overburdened but neither does anyone get left standing around feeling unneeded. It bothers me when people leave a meeting thinking, "Why was I there?" I realize the housecleaning experience provides a very simple model, but I believe we can learn from it.

Jesus tells those who follow him and put their trust in him, "You are the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world." Looking upward toward God turns us outward toward the world and its people. We Protestants have made salvation seem such a private matter that we've nearly lost it. There is no such thing as salvation for the individual alone because such aloneness is the very definition of sin. The nature of sin is alienation; the nature of life is love. Life not shared is a contradiction, like salt with no saltiness or a lamp kept from giving off light. The same holds true for churches as for individual believers. The church that exists for itself is a lamp under a basket: it may be giving off light, but who knows and who cares? And if that church grows in membership and resources, what does it become but a brighter light under a bigger basket? More and more tasteless salt. Not only is God's grace given to be shared, but it does not truly become grace until it is being shared. So, we keep asking the third visioning question, "What is Jesus Christ calling us to be and to do?" Church leaders, the more people we have asking that question, the saltier and brighter we will become.

Now, why the third scripture lesson, the one about praying in private? Taking Jesus seriously about our needing to be the salt of the earth and light of the world could lead to swelled-head syndrome and to a witness distorted by religious egotism. It's easy to confuse witnessing to the grace of God with showing off, pontificating about people's behavior and beliefs, or just annoying people with an endless stream of Jesus-talk that neither respects their privacy nor responds to them as real human beings with thoughts, questions, fears, needs, and lives of their own. As the churches struggle with declining numbers, Christianity grows enamored of public displays of religion which can be about as distasteful to onlookers as public displays of affection. Jesus reminds us that praying for display is not witnessing to God's grace; it's just showing off, and God does not care to be used that way. If we serving Jesus as the salt of the earth and light of the world, people should be moved to ask why we care to be compassionate, understanding, and self-giving, not why we are so religious and certainly not why we are so judgmental and eager to show off our own goodness.

Newly elected or re-elected church officers, we thank you for your willingness to serve. I hope and pray your experience in office will become more and more like our experience in housecleaning the church: sharing responsibility so none is overburdened and none left out and feeling useless, encouraging initiative and creativity while uniting in shared planning that adds satisfaction to service and fun to being a church. And I hope and pray that being a church together will keep turning us upward toward God and outward toward people in our various communities. That's what the visioning process is all about: turning us upward and outward together, but not in lockstep. That's what spirituality is, the inward movement of God's Spirit who turns us upward and outward together. We need each other, and so God graciously has given us also the need to be needed, welcomed, valued, and respected. God will give you the gifts you need to serve, but we need to keep bringing them together. That's what makes it alive and, yes, even fun.

So, thank you and, also, welcome. Welcome to a leadership I hope will spread through the congregation so more and more people will engage in being the church and channeling the grace of Jesus Christ outward to people God loves whether they know it or not. Amen.