

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ  
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor  
Sermon for the Service of Ordination and Installation, February 1, 2009  
Lessons: Jeremiah 31:31-37 and Mark 1:21-28

## THINK LIKE ONE, ACT LIKE ONE, BECOME ONE

It sounds like a trick, but if so, the trick is not a way of cheating or being phony, but an honest and realistic process for changing and growing into something – a new job, a new profession, a more healthful style of living, a new self-image, or anything else that requires me to act like a person I have not yet really become but commit myself to being. I must act the part, assuming the role – not playing the role, but putting myself into it – so I can learn how to be that person. Think like one, act like one, and so become one.

From day one, the new teacher must be a teacher for the children in her class, even though she may feel frighteningly inadequate. They need their teacher, and so she must think and act as their teacher, assuming the role and the responsibility. The truth, for anyone who has taken a position of trying to respond helpfully to people in their changing situations, is that the process of working toward becoming what you are already labeled never ends. It's always on-the-job training. I know the day will never come when I can say to myself, "Now you are the minister you want and need to be." Even more truly, I will never arrive at the point where I can say, "Now you are the disciple Christ called you to be."

Here is the difference between a disciple in training and a hypocrite. The word "hypocrite" comes from the Greek term for a play actor, a thespian, but evolved to mean someone playing a role to deceive others, a role that person has no intention of fulfilling, ever. More subtly, I become a hypocrite the day I tell myself that I have arrived, that I no longer need to be taught.

New officers and newly elected officers who have served before, first of all, thank you for your willingness to step into a leadership role in this community of faith in Jesus Christ to help us develop our life and ministry and move forward toward becoming the church Christ calls us to be. How does a person become a leader in a church – a trustee, a deacon, or an elder? Start thinking like one. Take steps of acting like one, small steps at first. Accept the role, not as a matter of pride, because it's not a thing of pride, but as a matter of humility and service. Expect yourself to be a trustee, a deacon, or an elder, and put your expectations into prayers while stepping up to the task. And remember what we all need to keep in mind every day, that with God, no deed or accomplishment can be evaluated rightly just by its success or failure, because God cares most about the spirit in which it is done.

We read the Bible to deepen and expand our understanding of God’s love and mercy, so we can live as people loved and forgiven by God, sharing the grace and freedom we have in Christ. We do not read the Bible to get the goods on ourselves or on other people – to gain information so we can speak with an authority we don’t have or to load up with authoritative tools for controlling other people. Through the prophet Jeremiah, we are helped to see that true knowledge of God is always knowledge of God’s love and mercy. Torn out of the context of love and mercy, any Bible truth becomes false, any church truth goes wrong and leads us astray. “. . . for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.” God wants the life-teaching known as torah written on our hearts so it becomes the way we think, respond to other people, plan our lives, and live our days. To be real that way, God’s life-teaching must always be for us the truth of love and mercy, of kindness and justice.

What is a deacon? The deacons are charged with responsibility to care for the sick, the friendless, and people in need and to encourage generosity throughout the church. The name deacon means minister, referring literally to a servant who waits tables, providing food for others. Together, the deacons do ministry, but they also lead the whole congregation into doing ministry. They lead by example and by encouragement, teaching what they themselves are learning of service in the way of Jesus Christ. So, a deacon learns to think like a deacon, act like a deacon, and keep becoming more and more a minister of Christ to the sick, the friendless, and people in the distress of need. But the deacons are a board, not a collection of Lone Rangers riding into town to rescue the helpless. Working together is crucial, and even working together within the board is not enough. Inviting more people and enabling them to work with you in ministry will help us keep becoming a church.

What is an elder? This one is different because the session *in its meetings* as the local church’s governing body has authority and power to the extent that such terms apply to the “running” of a church. The session is our decision-making body that sets policy and reviews practice. Such authority, however, is entrusted to the session *only as a body*, not to the individual elder. One secular parallel might be a school board member who participates in the authority and policy-making of the board but, as an individual, has no administrative authority in the schools.

In our lesson from the Gospel of Mark, the people praise Jesus as one who teaches with authority, but what do they mean? Jesus is not at all authoritarian. He does not tell them what they had better do to measure up to God’s standards. His critics are the ones who teach that way, judging but not helping – declaring *the way things should be* but not doing anything to change *the way things actually are*. Jesus deals with the people’s real needs and distresses. He does not tell them how they *should be*; he meets them with God’s love and mercy where they actually are in life. So, his teaching makes a difference for them, instead

of merely judging them and leaving them worse off than before. Too much of religious teaching simply adds guilt to distress, shames the afflicted, and frightens the confused. Jesus' authority is not what we usually mean by "authority." It is effective grace. He brings people God's grace in ways that make a difference in their lives.

An elder is a disciple of Jesus who expands the questions of spiritual growth beyond the needs of self to the needs of the congregation. The elder's natural concern for "me and mine" broadens into caring for the needs of the faith community, including its need to reach outward to people beyond its circle of faith. Experience in the faith leads now to a larger understanding of Christ's hopes of the whole body of the church. The elder sees a bigger picture than can be seen by the person asking only about personal and family needs for God's grace. The elder asks how we can include those who feel left out, those with different questions or interests. *How can we engage more people and enable them to join more actively in the congregation's ministry and service?*

What is a trustee? We do not ordain the trustees or ask them doctrinal questions that become vows. I think it is true that only in the United States do Presbyterian churches even have trustees, because here churches are incorporated. The session is the governing body, so what is left for the trustees to do, decide, and represent? They are not just the worker bees of the hive but officers of the church who represent the whole body, but in what way? The simplest statement I could come up with is this: the trustees are charged to be spiritual with material goods. That, however, is a tall order to be filled quietly and with a business-like grace. Charged with taking care of the building, the trustee puts the needs of people and fairness to contractors ahead of costs and materials. Charged with stewardship of money committed to God, the trustee remembers that when it comes to love and mercy, God is a spendthrift but not a fool. "Be wise as serpents," Jesus says, "but harmless as doves." I think it is helpful for a trustee to see the task, not a preserving a church for the future, but as keeping the church equipped and supplied for moving forward into the future doing ministry and rendering service.

And now for the remaining question, without which being a church officer can become only a frustration: *What is church member?* A disciple is one who follows Jesus, receiving and learning life from him in a completely new way. An apostle is a disciple who has matured enough to be sent to share Christ's grace with others who are not his disciples. A church member is a disciple and apostle-in-the-making who has joined with others in a community to make faith a matter shared in a spirit of mutual respect and encouragement for the good of all. So, the same message applies for the church member: think like one, act like one, and keep becoming one, remembering that to know God is to know God's love and mercy. Everything else is secondary. Amen.