

You in the Ministry?

Ephesians 4:11-16, John 13:12-17

Greeting

Grace and peace to you all in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ

It is an **immeasurable privilege** to stand before you this morning

I am **honored** and **elated** to be your preacher/candidate today.

I am deeply indebted to your PNC for affording me this moment.

But no matter who the preacher or what the occasion
as Presbyterians our most pressing concern on a Lord's Day
is always to **rightly hear** the word of the Lord for us, for this time

It is **my glad task** to lead us in that endeavor today.

Let us begin with a prayer for illumination.

Prayer for Illumination

Come Holy Spirit, come wind and breath and voice of God

Come and fill this place with your illuminating presence

Come and do what you have been doing
since the beginning of all time—

making something out of nothing
creating purpose out of chaos
forming a people, a congregation, a new reality

out of strangers and sad sacks and sinners like us
like me

This is what you do so well, O Lord—

you fill the deathly spaces of our common life
with your astounding resurrection life

So, come, Holy Spirit, come and brood over

our reading and hearing of this witness today

that the words will come off the page
that the good news will ring in our ears
that the calling of Jesus will go forth before us

In the name of the one whose raised-up life
we celebrate this Easter season

In Jesus' name,
we make this prayer

Amen.

True story

Nine months ago, on a Monday morning,
I went to **donate blood** at our local Red Cross blood drive

Now listen: I don't like needles. **BUT** ... when you give blood, you get
soda/peanut butter crackers, *so it all works out nicely in the end*

There I was sitting in the queue, waiting to hear my name, minding my
own business, **reading a little book on the Christian life**

Not a preacher's book, per se → just some
meditations on this Jesus life to which we are all called

Suddenly the gentleman seated next to me

—an older, slightly disheveled looking man

Suddenly he **leans over** in my direction

so far, in fact, I swear his head was in my lap

And he promptly **stares at my book**
just long enough to decipher what I was reading

Of course I'm thinking to myself

Hey pal, I think you're in my space, my zone, my bubble

Or to paraphrase some of the kids in my church

You're all up in my grill.

But just then he **cocked his head** to look me in the face

And with a **wrinkle across his eyes**
that suggested he thought maybe I was from Mars

—having figured out what I was reading—

He gravely asked

You in the ministry?

Now it occurs to me that

much like a good Biblical passage

there are **a number of ways** one might **interpret** that query

—some of them **not so flattering** to me

You? In the ministry?

→ “I know. Kind of pathetic, really.”

But it also occurs to me how we never think of the best replies

until long after the moment is gone

Don't you just hate that?

“Are you in the ministry?”

That's a **huge question**, Presbyterians
I've thought about it a lot ...

What I've **mostly been aware of** is just how much
my response to that inquiry has evolved, changed ...

How my **conceptions** of the word MINISTRY

—what I think about when I hear that term—

how these have been reshaped, remade—*reformed*

This has happened to me mostly
by **learning to pay attention** to the NT

- I have learned from Paul that Christ not only gives **good grace**
 he also gives to his people **good gifts**
 “spiritual gifts” that are for the building up of the church
 for supplying
 outfitting
 equipping *all of us* for **the vocation of ministry**
- And I have listened to Peter
 —like Paul, another of our first teaching elders—
 I’ve listened as Peter describes us
 not only as **sinners/strangers**
 being transformed into **saints/siblings**
 but he is bold in 1 Peter also to **designate** us—*all of us*
 a royal priesthood
 a set apart people
 a new community with a new calling
 grounded and energized by the new life of Christ
- And I have watched as Jesus—the beloved of God
 the fullness of the Godhead
 the one to whom all power/authority
 as this same Jesus **gets down and dirty** on his hands and knees
 and **graciously ministers** to those first disciples
 —putting his lofty status to work in lowly service
 —pointing to God’s power **through his weakness**
- And then, hearing him say, *to all of us*
I have given you an example
You’ll be blessed to follow it.

***What I appreciate is how all of this has worked on me;
 worked on my conception of the word MINISTRY***

what it is
 who does it
 and why

(I suspect there are number of you who known this same reformation)

Now, I know what my new friend meant by his question

—my fellow **blood donator**
 and his **Monday morning inquisition**

He wanted to know if I was a pastor/preacher/parson?

And those are **honorable hats** to wear

And of course, as it turned out, he guessed rightly

*Must have been the bowtie,
 or perhaps the Presbyterian scowl*

But if I could go back in time

If I could **answer** his question again

What would best capture my **sense of the gospel**

what I would most like to say to him,

with **humility** but also with some **assertion**

would be something like

“The ministry.”
 Yes! Indeed.
 You are right.

I am a Christian.

Because, you see, I have come to believe (and therefore to insist)

that ministry—*Christian* ministry

is neither **exclusively** nor even **primarily**
the purview of pastors, preachers, parsons

for that matter, neither is it the possession
of elders and deacons
staff and church workers

It is not a salary or a seat at certain tables that sets one apart ...
It is not **ordination** that marks one for Christian ministry.

The mark of a minister is *baptism*.

Baptism!

the sign and seal of God's grace in our lives
is also the **marker** and **mandate** for ministry

I believe that to be **claimed** by Jesus
is to be **called** by Jesus

to be **saved** by his grace
is to be **sent** into his work

I'm so grateful for the **strange/wonderful events**
that providentially drew my life into this particular ministry ...

but what hangs on the wall of my study, above a certificate of
ordination, is a little piece of paper that says ...
TRINITY PRESBYTERAN CHURCH - CERTIFICATE OF BAPTISM

My **vocation** (my calling) began right there ...

→ a life-long ministry of loving the Lord our God
with all that we have/are

and loving our neighbors as our ourselves

In the church I currently serve

we rotate our active elders on a June to June calendar ...

So right now I am in the middle of **elder training**

Ministering to Christ's ministers

Serving the servants of God is a **high calling** ...

So every year we spend many weeks in preparation

Two weeks ago, we were gathered in a Sunday School room
talking together **about this very matter**:

What is ministry? Who does it? Where does it happen?

One of our elders-elect, never before ordained
—a young mother of two; grown up in the church—

She spoke up and said

You know I am so glad we are talking about this

*I've thought for some time that the work I do
during the week **often feels like ministry to me***

She's a high school guidance counselor

and she began describing all the ways she **interacts** with ...

She said: **I've wanted to think about those moments as ministry**
but I've never known if *that's okay* → I don't want to take away

And so **we went around the room**

a middle manager with the Postal Service whose adult son ...
an oncology nurse with a spouse and two children
a social service worker who interacts with the homebound

Everyone began to list (as if for the first time)
all sorts of situations/settings/setup

wherein they could **imagine themselves *called***

to love the Lord/love their neighbors

I reminded them that the reason we Presbyterian ordain

elders—deacons—pastors/preachers → ... hire staff
 is not to do the ministry of God's people **for them**
 but to serve God's people **with what they need**
to go and be Christ's foot-washing ministers
 within and (especially) beyond these walls:

In high schools, Post Offices, ICUs, and living rooms ...

In our homes/within our families/among our friends
 With our neighbors—both actual and symbolic
 Whether you are eight or 18 or 80

In classrooms/courtrooms/boardrooms alike
 In hardware stores/real estate agencies/insurance offices

In fields and orchards/ in barns and in workshops
 making tables/making hope

On the playground at recess
 At the water cooler on break
 In chatrooms and texts and e-mails

In the Dominican Republic
 In Gautier, MS and New Orleans ...
 Around the corner at 2:35, on a plain old Tues

I could on like this → But there's lunch, and this little meeting

With our **minds**
 With our **hands**
 With our **hearts**
 With our **voices** — we are called into ministry
 telling the story of God's own beloved: **who washes feet**
 who hangs with us in our dying
 and who rises up for our living

It is not that, because we are Christians

everything we do

in church or in the world
 is somehow *automatically* ministry
 —as if it **radiates** from us, without intention

It is rather that, **because Christ is alive**
 every moment is **thick with possibilities** for his ministry
 At every juncture, he is present, calling us to faith, hope, love

Every place we find ourselves
 every labor and love we take up
 every moment of every season

becomes an opportunity to wash someone's feet,
 to make known the **inscrutable grace of God**
 through simple acts of **service** and **agape**
 and with words of truth and compassion

We do not do this through our own strength
 —as if ministry was just about the church
rolling up its sleeves and trying a little harder
 We minister in and through resurrected life of JC
whose ministry to us is the source/sample/strength for ...

We love, because God first loved us

*For I have set you an example,
that you also should do as I have done to you.*

No question that the front door of the gospel

is the good news of God's salvation in Jesus Christ

and no question that the inside of this house called NT Xianity

is the good news of God's sanctification ...

but there is also no question that God's house has a back door

for the God who **saves**
and the God who **sanctifies**
is also the God who **sends**

sends us into ministry

faith-filled
foot-washing
Christ-exalting

ministry

I trust you understand that

None of what I have said thus far

is about **minimizing** or **deprecating**

the particular ministries of
pastors/elders/deacons/staff

The ministry of all believers is not about

lowering the expectations we have of our leaders

but about the **raising the expectations** of our ourselves

to where the core of the NT witness
and the best of the Presbyterian way

have always placed them

Precisely because **we all share in ministry**

we need servants of the church who

with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love

minister unto us

so that we might have what we need

to minister unto God's world

If any part of this resonates with you at all

and knowing you as I have come to know you through your PNC

I suspect that it does

then I want you to know that **I would be honored** to be

- your **teaching elder**—together with you associate pastor, serving you with word and sacrament
- your **moderator**—with your Session, serving you with leadership, direction, and example
- your **Head of Staff**—fostering a creative/supportive space for your fine staff to serve you with their many gifts
- your **pastor**—together with many others, serving you with prayer and presence as you live your lives, serve the Lord
- to be your **friend**—another brother in Christ ...

All so this, with an eye toward serving you
that together, we might serve the Lord

New Wilmington Presbyterian Church

Are you in the ministry?

If so, and I believe so

then perhaps we might share in it together for a season

through and for

the One who ministers to us

throughout all our days

Alleluia!

Amen.

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