

Good Under-Shepherds II

In the name of the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for us, his sheep, dear friends in Christ: A few months back (it was Good Shepherd Sunday to be precise) I preached a sermon on the office of the holy ministry. (And no, I don't expect than anyone actually remembers it.) It was based on a reading from the Book of Acts in which St. Paul, who was then about to depart from the city of Ephesus, calls together all the pastors of the churches that he had helped plant in the city and surrounding areas over a period of three years. He brings them together to say farewell, and to give them some final instructions about how they were to carry on their ministries after he'd gone. It's really a very moving story as Paul, who is essentially the spiritual father or grandfather of these congregations – as well as the seminary professor of all the pastors – pours out his heart, and gives to these men specific directions and sincere warnings about what they are to be doing and what things they need to watch out for as they serve their churches as under-shepherds for Christ the Lord. Based on that text, the sermon I preached had to do with the fact that still today Jesus calls certain men into the ministry and he tells them how they are to serve as shepherds of the flocks that he has entrusted to their care. Accordingly, we talked about what a pastor does, what should be expected of him, what kind of authority he has—and doesn't have; that sort of thing. And it's important that everyone in the church know these things because you're either a pastor or you're being served by one. It works best when everyone knows what the job is and what it isn't.

Anyway, in this morning's Epistle lesson we get another angle on this issue of the church's ministry. You see, we know that our Lord still calls certain men to serve his church; but now he does this calling through the church itself. That is, a congregation of Christians, acting as God's agent and under the direction of his Holy Spirit, decides who it wants to serve as its pastor. And once they decide, they issue a call – a call which we understand to be from Christ himself whose Spirit is operating in and through the congregation. That being said, the question for a congregation becomes, "Whom shall we call?" "What kind of man should we be looking for?" "What are the qualifications for the office?" Fortunately for us, Christ did not leave his Church without answers. These are the very questions being addressed in today's Epistle in which St. Paul tells his young protégé Timothy precisely what kind of men he should be identifying and ordaining to serve the churches – and not just as pastors, but also as the other servants of the church. Here in the text they are called *deacons*; but that would translate for us into the various church officers that assist the pastor like elder, president, trustee, treasurer – all those offices that attend aspects of the Church's business *other than* the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments. Here we are told exactly what we should be looking for in those who serve.

But before we get into it, let me preface the remarks that follow by saying that it can sound rather self-serving whenever a pastor teaches on the subject of the ministry – like it's an opportunity to toot one's own horn. That's not my intent at all. The fact is that this is a teaching of the Holy Scriptures. For that reason alone, it's something that we need to review now and then; and since it came up in this morning's readings, now seemed like a pretty good time to do it. And there are other good reasons that we should periodically review this topic: first, you have a right to know what's to be expected of your pastor and church officers. Second, you never know when you may be in the call process yourself. The fact is that if Christ's second coming doesn't happen first, sooner or later you're going to need someone to replace me in this pulpit (... some of you are probably hoping for sooner rather than later. All in God's good timing, my friends). Third, you need to know how to identify and encourage potential candidates. The ranks of the Church's clergy are filled with men whom someone, somewhere, at some time said to them, "You know, I think *you'd* make a pretty good pastor. Have you ever thought about becoming a minister?" That little bit of encouragement might be all it takes to plant the seed and start the process. Fourth, there maybe someone sitting here today who's wrestling with the idea of entering the service of the Church; maybe one of our youth—or maybe someone older. I went to seminary with men twice my age (my age back then, not now). And I know men who are well into their eighties who are still faithfully serving. And finally, we need to know how to identify suitable candidates for the other offices of the Church. So for all these reasons, this is a timely topic.

Paul writes that anyone who aspires to serve the church as an overseer (that is, a pastor) desires a noble task. And that's true, for what could be nobler than proclaiming the Gospel of salvation and helping to prepare the Bride of Christ to receive her Lord? This is not to belittle other equally noble occupations; it's merely to say that serving the Church is an honorable profession. And yet, it's one thing to have the desire to serve and quite another to be fit for the service. By laying out for us the qualifications that he does, Paul makes it clear that not everybody with the itch should scratch it. On the other side of it, churches seeking pastors often use a different set of criteria than the one that appears here. Sometimes they're willing to overlook the biblical requirements if the man in question has other desirable traits the congregation is after; such as he's particularly charismatic, or he's really good with children, or he's especially effective at shaking the money tree, whatever. But something we need to understand is that Christ loves his Church and he's very interested in seeing that she is well served. So, we must let him set the standards. We are not free to overlook or overrule them.

So, what are the standards for a pastor? First Paul says that he needs to be above reproach. The word he uses literally means "not ill spoken of". It means that no one is publicly charging him with bad behavior. And I suppose it seems obvious that you wouldn't want a pastor who is engaged in some form of criminal or disreputable activity. The Lord wants his servants to have a generally good reputation; after all, they represent him. And yet it doesn't mean that they be without sin. If that were a requirement the Church would have no pastors. Pastors are not, as some seem to think, more holy or perfect than other Christians. In fact, what Paul writes here about pastors being above reproach, he elsewhere says should be expected of every Christian. All we who bear his name represent Christ to the world. Still, the pastor should be someone who sets an example of what it means to be a redeemed and forgiven sinner struggling to live a life of faith that is pleasing to the Lord. [No, I will not be handing out scorecards for you to evaluate me.]

He goes on to say that a pastor should be the husband of one wife – and I probably don't need to tell you that there's a whole lot of debate about exactly what that means. One thing that's clear is that if he's supposed to be a *husband*, it means that he must be a *male*. That agrees with the Epistle lesson we had last week, in which it was stated that women are not to teach or exercise authority over men in the Church. It has to do with the order of creation. In the home and in the Church, God has given the responsibility of leadership to men. And since the pastoral office is a position of leadership, it can only be filled by men. For that reason, our church body does not permit the ordination of women. I hasten to add here that it has nothing to do with relative talents, gifts, or abilities. I'm certain that any number of women could do the job just fine. But I'm equally certain that if a woman is serving as a pastor, she was not called by God to do it. Instead, she was called by a congregation operating against the will and explicit instructions of God. Of course, some women hear that and say, "Well, if I can't be a pastor then the church is neglecting the talents I've been given and cheating itself of all that I could be doing for it", which is nonsense. The church very much needs the unique gifts and talents of women – it just doesn't need them – indeed it is prohibited from using them in positions of leadership.

But moving on, what does it mean to be the husband of *one wife*? Obviously, it would rule out anyone practicing polygamy (sorry, Warren Jeffs). But does it also mean that someone who's single cannot serve? What about someone who's widowed? Or divorced? Or who has remarried after being widowed or divorced? A lot of ink has been spilled over these questions; but to cut to the chase, the way we have understood it is that the Church's pastors whether single or married are to be sexually chaste, and their marriage records clean. Specifically, someone who abandoned his wife and ran off with his secretary, say, is not a qualified candidate. It has to do with the issue of trust. How can anyone expect a man to keep the sacred promises that accompany ordination, like not to divulge the sins confessed to him in private, if he fails to keep life's most sacred promise: to love, honor, and cherish until death parts us?

There are other qualifications: he must be sober minded; that is, he must be able to think clearly and be serious. He must be self-controlled; the word Paul uses means that he be someone who is self-disciplined, able to control his impulses, and not given to bouts of reckless behavior. He must be hospitable; that is, he must be someone who reaches out to strangers – who likes people and wants to get to know them. And he must be able to teach. That's vitally important because it's a huge part of what a pastor does.

Then Paul gives a list of negatives to be avoided in a pastor: not a drunkard; that's a no brainer. Not violent or quick tempered. Believe me, the job takes patience; you don't want a pastor who is prone to flying

off the handle or who explodes with rage at the slightest provocation. Not quarrelsome; that is, someone who's always looking for an argument, always trying to stir up trouble, who insists that he's always right and hasn't got the humility to admit when he's made a mistake. And finally, he can't be someone who's only doing the job for the money, who sees the pastoral office primarily as a means to enrich himself. I don't need to tell you that there are a lot of hucksters out there who are doing just that – and all of them give the church and the ministry a bad name.

Following this, Paul talks about the pastor's family life. In a lot of professions people would say that such an analysis is strictly off limits; that what goes on at home is no indication of how someone will perform at work. That isn't the way the Lord sees it. The church is a family, after all. And so the way a man leads his family is a pretty good indication of how he will lead a church. And what you're looking for here is balance. Proper parenting means exercising discipline with love so that children will mature to be good, productive citizens. It also means knowing how to apply loving discipline to different children in different situations. In the church we call this Law and Gospel. A pastor needs to know how to use them both properly. So, if the pastor's family is terrified of him, or they're marching around like little soldiers as did the Von Trapp kids in *The Sound of Music*, that's probably not the kind of fellow you want terrorizing your church. Similarly, if the pastor's family is out of control, if the children are disrespectful and disobedient – that's likely what your church will be if you call such a spineless wonder to serve you.

And a couple more things: a pastor should not be a recent convert. The possibility of this happening in one of our churches is minimized by the rigid entry requirements for seminary. Still, the indication is that you have to watch out for two things. One is the initial burst of zeal a new convert feels when he comes to understand the Gospel of God's grace in Christ. He feels like he has to tell the world, and so the ministry seems to be the obvious way to do it. Paul would say, "Not so fast. It takes time to grow to maturity, and there's this little thing about cross bearing you have to learn first." The other concern is that the attraction to the ministry might be nothing more than the desire to be in charge of something. A recent convert might look at what a pastor does when leading worship or teaching with perhaps a bit of envy and say, "I can do that" – which, Paul says, is a lot like what caused Satan's fall: he saw what God was doing and said, "I can do that." As you recall, his failed attempt made a mess for everyone.

Coming finally to the last requirement, we heard that a pastor should be well thought of by outsiders. A more literal translation of what Paul wrote would be to say that a pastor needs to have a good witness to those who are outside the church. And here the idea is that a pastor must be able to engage in conversation with those who do not believe in the Lord Jesus and confess him boldly to them. He must not be one who hides and effectively denies his faith in the company of unbelievers or in times of persecution. That's the trap of the devil that Peter fell into at the trial of Jesus when he said, "I don't know him" – and it's the kind of disgraceful confession that a pastor of Christ's church must never repeat.

So much, then, for those who would serve as pastors. After giving us the standards for them, Paul goes on to give the requirements for other servants of the church. And at least the way we do it, there're some significant differences. Usually, you call a pastor from the outside, and he'll be your pastor until he moves on, retires, or dies in office (yes, you can keep hoping). But our church officers are drawn from within the congregation, and usually their terms of office have time limits. Unfortunately, this can create a lot of problems because there rarely seem to be enough willing hands to do the work. People are inclined to feel, "I've done my share, now it's somebody else's turn" without any consideration that the church is best served by those who are best qualified for the task. I remember reading the account of a man who had been raised as an orthodox Jew. He'd become disenchanted with Judaism and was exploring the Christian faith. He started attending worship services at an Episcopal church, always sitting alone in the back, just listening, watching, and learning. He'd been doing this for about two months when, after worship one Sunday he noticed a couple people discussing something and obviously talking about him because they kept looking over at him. He thought maybe he'd done something wrong. At length they came over to him. He thought, "Now I'm really in trouble." Well, pretty close. They wanted to know if he'd be interested in teaching Sunday School. They couldn't find anyone else who was willing. He explained that he wasn't even a Christian. They didn't even flinch. "That's okay; we just need someone who will do it." Sad. But sometimes the same mentality pervades our own circles. It's not a question of who's best qualified; but rather who can we get to do it? Or whose turn is it?

Regarding the qualifications, you'll see that most of them are pretty much the same as for pastors. They too must have good reputations; not be double tongued, that is, someone who says one thing to this person, and something entirely different to another. Again, they are not to be drunkards; no surprise there. Being able to teach is not a requirement; but what is required is that they hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. It means that they must know and agree with the doctrines of the church they serve. It's a real problem when lay leaders are not in agreement with the confessions of their own church because what they'll end up doing is undermining the teaching of the pastor. Then people don't know what to believe. Like the pastors, the officers are to be known as men who keep their own houses in order. What's interesting to me that even their wives' behavior enters the discussion; but it didn't for pastors. Apparently, Paul thought it was okay for a pastor's wife to be a little rowdy (good thing for us, too). And on that note, I'd better wrap up.

Paul's last comment is the capstone: those who faithfully serve Christ's Church in any capacity gain good standing for themselves; that is, their work is pleasing in the sight of God and we anticipate that one day they will be rewarded for it. But even more important, he says that they gain great confidence in faith in Jesus Christ through which they are saved. And I think that those who have served the church can attest to that; that through their service, whatever it is or was, they have had to rely more on the Lord Jesus, and through his faithfulness and his Word he's caused them to gain a deeper and more sincere trust in him – and no treasure on earth is worth more than that. May our gracious Lord Jesus, who gave himself over to death in loving service for us equip us all to serve one another. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!