

June 13, 2010

Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

Equipping the Saints for Ministry

By The Reverend Kay Davis-Dudding

On the occasion of her retirement from ministry

Ephesians 4: 1-7, 11-16

Two weeks ago Sandy was ill and I preached his sermon for him. It would sure be great if he could do the same for me, today.

When a person completes three years of seminary, successfully passes the four ordination exams, and finds a call to a church, one preaches a “candidating sermon.” In so doing, the tendency is to want to include some of everything you know, all the brilliant exegesis of the scripture passages, all the insights learned from favorite professors—everything!

I’m feeling a similar tendency today, but mine is to share with you all I’ve learned in 18 years of ministry. I probably don’t need to tell you that there’s a whole lot you don’t learn in seminary. Cases in point include: 101-year-old Aunt Gerty in Deckerville, my former church, who couldn’t have surprised me more when one day before giving her home communion, she put her hand to her mouth and quickly handed me her teeth. There was the parishioner in a nursing home who cut her hair just before I arrived, but had only been able to do so on one side of her head, insisting that I had to cut the other side for her before she would talk to me about her future. Yes, I did it! It has been totally humbling to be with families in those long hours in the intensive care unit of the hospital, when the

truth of life becomes clear, when our own strength is spent, when we can only rely on the One whose weakness is greater than our strength.

Before I continue, let us pray. *With you alone, O God, are wisdom, truth and light. You are wisdom in a world full of folly, truth in a world content to play fast and loose, and light in the darkness we sense around us. Silence within me all words but those which show forth your truth. May the meditation of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.*

The passages I chose today from Ephesians are the ones Mark Pawlowski, my former minister from Three Rivers, Michigan, chose on the day I was installed here at Westminster—January 11, 1998. My clergy friend Pat Reid, also from Michigan, used them when she made her “charge” that day to you, the congregation. “The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to *equip the saints* for the work of ministry, for building up the Body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.”

Emphasized that day was the piece of the passage “To equip the saints” That’s you, you know! Look at those sitting next to you and around you. Saints! And I, as well as your other pastors, have been called to equip each of you for the work of ministry. I can clearly remember Pat, admonishing you that I, and the other pastors, are not to do all the work of the church; we are to prepare *you* for doing your particular ministry. We are not to do the ministry for you.

An ongoing area of discussion in the church has involved the functions of clergy and members. Congregational models range all the way from clergy-dominated structures to patterns for ministry which recognize virtually no clergy at all. This Ephesians passage provides insight to enhance the roles of clergy, and members alike, with a succinct model for ministry, drawn from the perspective of the New Testament church.

Verse 11 offers a rather unique glimpse at the role of clergy, through the phrase “pastors and teachers.” There are commas after apostles, prophets, and evangelists, but no comma between the two titles of pastors and teachers, thus ascribing to persons in that position, a dual role. Clergy are “pastor-teachers.” The passage then goes on to say these people are to “equip,” which in Greek, literally means “setting a fractured limb” or “repairing a dislocation.” It means bringing about smooth movement and coordinated effort of the body. Thus, the implications of equip, for the Body of Christ, are apparent. The church doesn’t limp along in its mission if all its members work well together. So, the pastor-teacher role then is to perfect, round out, train and equip the saints so that the church is built up to the perfection and fullness of Christ. In a way the pastor-teacher is a “body builder” who strengthens and coordinates the ministries of the Body of Christ. We would no doubt use the words facilitator or coordinator. The role of all of your pastors then is to be catalysts, giving energetic direction to you, the saints, that you might be equipped “for the work of ministry.” I happen to think that together we’re doing an amazing job of that.

I read a number of books and articles about what I might say today, and came across a book entitled *What Ministers Wish Church Members Knew* and I thought that might be a good direction for me. What have I wished that you understood better about being **the church**?

First, that nobody owns the church. Well, in truth, the presbytery “owns” the church. But I think you know what I mean. No one, by themselves, can make a decision about our church. We ordain elders and ministers who together discern, as best they can, the will of God—not their own will, as Sandy said a few weeks back, but the will of God. Much that has to do with God falls under the category of mystery. We will never fully understand God, but we pray, and we make decisions by faith, which may not always be the popular opinion. We humans can often take ourselves too seriously, I think, getting wrapped up in things of concern to us, and losing sight of whose church this really is and why we are here.

Second, worship isn’t a spectator sport. That kind of understanding of worship gives permission to see one’s role in the worship life of the church as the “critic.” The quality and place of everything in a worship service has to pass the critic’s test of: “Do I like it?” “Do I agree with it?” “What does it do, for me?” Some of us seem to have gotten the impression that worship is for us, and that’s just wrong. Worship isn’t for us. It is for God. The one who needs to be happy with our worship, is God, not us. Kierkegaard once described worship as a great drama in which church members are on stage and God is the audience. His point being that worship is our offering to God, and therefore watching and judging aren’t possible. Because to try to please God requires all our energies, as we seek to serve rather than to be served.

Third, ministry can sometimes be very discouraging for people in leadership positions. Whether ordained or lay, doing ministry can put one in the position of being criticized. It’s hard sometimes, but it goes with the territory.

Fourth—church growth—I’ve heard people lament, comparing our numbers today with those of years past. There isn’t anything inherently good or bad about numbers, but the size of a congregation doesn’t in itself tell *anything* about its faithfulness. A man named Jan Linn said he grew up in one of the largest churches in his denomination, but they were also prejudiced, racist, sexist and believed only in a God who was white, Protestant and male. The size of the church said nothing about their faithfulness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Growth itself should never be our aim—being the church and sharing our faith should be. And in the next few weeks you will hear about an amazing opportunity to learn more about faith sharing. I will personally pray for each of you to take that opportunity.

Next, the church needs unconditional love. Theologian, Paul Tillich, once said that the church he loved so much was also the source of his greatest frustrations. The problem is that a love/hate relationship often can become a “take it” or “leave it” attitude which then leads to folks leaving a church, as well as church splits. The church is first and foremost the body of Christ and, if we belong to *him first*, though we many not agree with everything and everyone, we will be, **the church**.

Now, I’ve also read a number of books about the hard stuff (for me) I want to say today. John Hughes, a psychologist said, “Saying hello and saying good-bye are the two major learning tasks all humans need to accomplish.” Many people he said, in institutions for the emotionally disturbed, are there because they ‘fouled up’ at either saying ‘hello’ or saying ‘good-bye.’ Some people *never* learn to say ‘good-bye.’ Some haven’t ever said ‘good-bye’ to their mothers or fathers or spouses who died some time ago, and he or she still continues to dominate the person’s life. Some people have been jilted in

love, and yet never said 'good-bye' to that relationship. As a result they carry that failure into subsequent relationships. Most of us could use more help in saying 'good-bye.'

One book I read suggests there are various models of how pastors retire. Let's see, there is:

- Bite the Bullet, deny and avoid dealing with personal feelings. Not me!
- Don't allow your emotions to show. Definitely not me!
- Accept whatever type of event others plan for you at your departure. I'm doing that, and am so very thankful.
- Or...steal off into the night very quickly. Not!

Dr. Fletch at the Alban Institute found that terminally ill people have four major tasks to perform when they discover they are going to die soon, and which I believe are also true when one will retire soon.

1. They need to take control of what remains of their life as far as possible, with some help if necessary, as opposed to passively letting others dictate the way they will die. For me, the planning committee won't let me in on anything about my retirement luncheon next month. But control remains as Fred and I have made plans for traveling, for golfing on Tuesday mornings at 9 (the day and time of the long staff meetings I won't miss). Ministry wise, I look forward to supporting the spiritual needs of patients as volunteer chaplain at The Hospice of Dayton.

2. They need to get their affairs in order. If you've seen my office lately you won't think I'm doing a very good job with that one!

3. They need to let old grudges go. I don't have many of these, but am working on those that have crept in.

4. They need to say thank you to the people for whom they feel gratitude. And I thank you so much for your ministry to me, as well as for the opportunity I've had to minister to you.

I am hopeful, that in the area of pastoral care I have been able to equip you—equip you for being a Stephen Minister and for accepting the help of a Stephen Minister when the time comes. We have in place right now, three support groups – Good Grief, Between Jobs, and Adult Children with Aging Parents. We have an older adult ministry, a prayer shawl ministry, and care partners. Along with your other ministers, I have been able to be with you personally in the hospital and in other times of trial or crisis in your lives. If I have had any success in my role as Associate Pastor for Pastoral Care, then the equipping I have begun will allow those ministries to continue.

So, let's continue to celebrate our last weeks together. When I retire I will certainly hold you and Westminster in prayer, but will not perform any other pastoral care for you. I won't because I want to give that privilege to your interim pastor, and then, in time, the new installed pastor. Your friendship will deepen with the new associate pastor over time—just as ours has. I challenge you all to be wonderful and faithful supporters of my successors. That will be your best affirmation that my pastoral care ministry with you was healthy and strong and enduring.

It is my prayer that you have been equipped for the ministry of doing pastoral care for each other, your ministers, and those outside the church, and through that experience have deepened your commitment to God, made know in Jesus Christ. Your continued growth in these areas will be the best tribute you can give to me and to my ministry with you. And, if I learn that you have not been my successor's best supporters, I will come back to haunt you, I promise!