
A Minister's Job Description

I Timothy 4:11-16

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A number of years ago, when the Episcopal Church in Hawaii began their search for a new Bishop, the delegates at their annual convention were asked to name some of the characteristics they would most like to see in their next church leader, and here's some of what they said –

Our next Bishop must be a spiritual leader who is local, a good communicator, married, happily married, with a family, a good administrator, a sense of humor, military experience, sound education, healthy, dynamic, approachable, a strong leader, honest, sympathetic, congenial, humble, self-confident, courageous, warm, wise, patriotic, good-looking, clear diction, not a social climber, manly, father-figure, a good singer, sports-minded, cultivated, cool, common sense, a-political...

When this list was released, one of the delegates at that convention went to a microphone and suggested one addition to the list –

Our next Bishop must be able to travel between the islands without the use of a plane or boat.

My first Area Minister told me a few weeks into my life as an ordained minister that I would always have as many bosses as there were members of any church that I was serving. He told me that every one of those church members would have a different understanding of what my job as their minister was, and how well I was doing it. And then finally he warned me. He told me that if I tried to satisfy all of those people with all those expectations then not only would I flame out of ministry quickly, but that I would also wind up disappointing Him who had called me into ministry in the first place, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Well, after four years of trying desperately to be the kind of minister he had warned me about, I had an ulcer and a doctor who was telling me that it was a symptom of stress, and that it was either going to force me to change the way that I was doing my job or to change the job that I was doing. Needless to say, that was a rather rude wake-up call. I knew that I needed to rethink the way that I was going about ministry, and in the process that text we just heard read from I Timothy chapter 4 was some of the most important grist for the mill.

I Timothy together with II Timothy and Titus are what the scholars call the Pastoral Epistles. These letters present themselves as being instructions from the Apostle Paul to a couple of young associates in ministry that he was leaving in charge of churches over which he himself had exercised spiritual leadership. This is why some of the most important things found anywhere in the New Testament about the church and its ministers are found in I Timothy, 2 Timothy and Titus. And that includes our text this morning. In these verses Paul told Timothy about how he should exercise his ministry in the church. And every time I read it I am struck again by the way that Paul carefully balanced Timothy's sense of Divine call to the ministry and the church's participation in the whole process. Verse 14 is the key for me.

Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you through prophecy with the laying on of hands by the council of elders.

You see, what Paul wanted Timothy to understand was that he was both answerable to God and accountable to the church for his ministry. A minister who thinks that he or she answers to God alone can easily become demanding and delusional. And a minister who thinks that he or she is accountable only to the church can quickly become a people-pleaser who risks sacrificing his or her soul on the altar of fleeting popularity. And so Paul told Timothy that his ministry was not going to be an either/or choice between these two alternatives, but rather a both/and proposition. He told Timothy that he was going to have to answer to the God who had called and gifted him for ministry as well as being accountable to the church that had confirmed that call and had become the context for that ministry. And as I held this mirror up to myself and my ministry, it showed me that I was going to have to learn how to pay attention to both the counsel of the church and the Lordship of Jesus Christ if I was going to be a faithful minister.

Now, it should be obvious that I am never going to be able to do and be everything that every one of you thinks that I should do and be. Trying that got me an ulcer 25 years ago. But this doesn't mean that there aren't some pretty basic things that you have every right to expect of me as your minister. Church Consultant Lyle Schaller has referred to these expectations as "*paying the rent,*" and he says that they fall into three broad categories. First of all, you have every right to expect that your minister will take seriously the ministry of preaching and worship. Second, you have every right to expect that your minister will take seriously the ministry of pastoral care. And third, you have every right to expect that your minister will take seriously the task of making sure that the organization of this church is in good running order, and that it is moving in the right direction. Two other areas of expectation might legitimately be added to this list because we are, after all, a "*Disciples*" congregation. You have every right to expect that your minister will take seriously the task of keeping before the church and the world the social implications of the Gospel. And you have every right to expect that your minister will take seriously the particular mission of this denomination to work for the visible unity of the church.

Now, Lyle Schaller says that if a minister has problems paying this rent, or paying it on time, or paying it in full, then the church needs to rethink the fitness of that minister for ministry. A minister who can't, or won't, do these things is not keeping faith with the call and counsel of the church. You see, I understand that I am accountable to you for each of these things, and I try to attend to them to the best of my abilities. My ministry has a context, and for eight years now that context has been Northway Christian Church. I work for you. But you need to know that you are not my only or even my highest boss.

I was called to ministry when I was 12 years old and on a retreat at a Benedictine monastery in Southern California. God called my name out loud and I answered. As time passed, my particular call to ministry came into better and better focus. God gradually made it clear to me that what He was specifically asking me to do with my life was to serve Him in congregational life and that where those congregations were going to be was in the Christian Church (*Disciples of Christ*). This explains why I am here this morning rather than teaching in a college somewhere or preaching from the pulpit of a church of a different denomination. I was called to be a pastor of Disciples congregations. But there's been more to my call than just this "*what*" and "*where*." God has also taken a real interest in the "*how*." You see, along the way my ministry has been decisively shaped by some very specific images about how I am to do my job.

- First of all, God gave a particular shape to my ministry in Christian college by fashioning me in the Old Testament image of a "*teaching priest*," the one who stands in the presence of God for a word to speak to the people (Jeremiah 23:18). Martin Marty has written that ministers encounter counseling second to the counselor, education second to the teacher, administration second to the business executive, trouble second to the sheriff, divorce second to the lawyer, sickness second to the doctor and death second to the undertaker. So what are ministers first at, he wonders? What is the minister's specialty? And Martin Marty answers, "*A minister is a trained expert in only one sphere – the Scriptures and Christian Faith.*" And so it is that I know that my first responsibility is to speak the Word of God from Scripture into your lives just as clearly and as often as I possibly can.
- Second, God gave a particular shape to my ministry in seminary by further fashioning me in the image of the "*wounded healer*." Like every spiritual leader in the Bible, I quickly learned that God was going to use me not because I was perfect in every way, but rather because I was honest about my hollowness apart from God. Thornton Wilder's play "*The Angel that Troubled the Waters*" is about God's refusal to heal a doctor who struggled with depression. And in the play an angel explained why –

Doctor, without your wounds, where would your power be? It's your melancholy that makes your low voice tremble into the hearts of men and women. The very angels themselves cannot persuade the wretched in

this earth as can one human being broken on the wheels of living. In love's service, only wounded soldiers can serve. (Dodd 90)

I think that this is what Paul meant in 2 Corinthians 4:7-9 when he explained that we always have the treasure of God's grace in cracked pots. It is our weakness and not our strength that God can most readily use. And so I know that it is also an important part of my particular call to ministry to be a real human being - to let you know that I laugh and cry, stumble and fall, and then to *"make all of these painful and joyful experiences available to you as sources for spiritual clarification and understanding"* (Nouwen 72).

- During my Doctoral studies God further shaped the particular shape of my ministry with the image of the *"servant leader."* The first assigned reading we were all given as we began the program at Austin Seminary was Robert Greenleaf's book Servant Leadership. And he began that book by summarizing the plot of Herman Hesse's novel Journey to the East, the story of a man named Leo who accompanies a group of specially chosen travelers, helping them along and doing all the menial chores. Everything progressed quite nicely until the day that Leo mysteriously vanished from the scene. And soon that group *"fell into disarray and the journey was abandoned... they cannot make it without the servant Leo."* Years later one of those travelers was introduced to Leo again and discovers that this one that they had known as the humble servant was in fact the great and noble leader of the order that sponsored the journey. Sound familiar? Like me do you see Jesus girding Himself with a towel and stooping to wash His disciples' feet (John 13) when you hear this story? It is only by serving that we lead, and I know that this must be part of the *"how"* of my ministry.
- And finally, during my recent Sabbatical in the School for Spiritual Directors at the monastery in Pecos, my ministry was further shaped by the image of the *"soul friend."* Theologian Karl Barth once said that *"when people come to us for help that they do not really want to learn more about living: they want to learn more about what is on the farther edge of living – God"* (189). And it is this insight that fuels the ministry of spiritual direction. It is my job to help you know God better. As the author of Hebrews put it, someday I will have to give an accounting for what I have done with your soul. And so, when I am finished here, my ministry should be measured by but one standard – do you know Jesus Christ more intimately than you did before? That's it. I will have only done my job if on that day you can answer with an unqualified *"yes."*

There is a story told about a rabbi named Zushua. As he lay dying his followers gathered round him and asked, *"Rabbi Zushua, give us one final wise word before you die."* And Zushua said, *"When I stand before God on the Judgment Day, God will not ask me, 'Zushua, why weren't you more like Abraham or Moses?' Instead what God will ask is, 'Zushua, why weren't you more like Zushua?'"* And when my time comes to stand before the Lord face to

face, I am not going to be asked “*Why weren’t you more like Billy Graham, or Mother Teresa, or Fred Craddock, or Joel Osteen?*” No, God’s question for me is going to be, “*Doug, why weren’t you more like who I intended you to be?*” And I know that for me means being a teaching priest, a wounded healer, a servant leader and a soul friend while I am here at Northway Christian Church. Yes, I work for you, and I’m really glad that I do. But I finally answer to God.

Sources

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