

“The Hazards and Joys of Christian Ministry”

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President Blount, Dean Currie, Vice Chairman Rikard, distinguished members of the faculty, administrators, and members of the class of 2009. My congratulations to all of you who are graduating with the degree of Master of Arts in Christian Education and with the degree of Master of Divinity. It is a special privilege for me to be here because a member of my staff, Jen Evans, is one of the recipients of the Master of Arts Degree in Christian Education.

One of the unique aspects of serving as the minister of the First Presbyterian Church in Charlotte is that our worship service on Sunday morning is televised on WSOC-TV, the local ABC affiliate. For those of us who serve as ministers, it means that sometimes people recognize us whom we may not know. I remember one occasion when I was shopping in the local Harris Teeter grocery store. As I was passing the wine aisle, a young woman stopped me and told me that she was having a dinner party that night and need to pick out a wine and was not sure which one to pick. I talked to her for a moment and then made a rather general suggestion. All of a sudden her eyes lit up and she looked at me and said, “Oh, my gosh, you’re that minister on television.”

I.

This morning I wish to speak about “The Hazards and Joys of Christian Ministry.” The context of these remarks is Paul’s letter to the church at Rome where Paul’s sets out his own understanding of the gospel. The Book of Romans is generally regarded as the culmination of Paul’s work. In his introduction he refrains from mentioning any co-workers. The reason for this seems clear. This is how Paul understands the Christian gospel and he realizes that, if this gospel is to be a world religion, it will have to be explained in terms that the church at Rome can understand. He begins his letter with apostolic greetings (Romans 1: 1-7). Then he expresses his profound desire to visit the church at Rome (Romans 1:8-15). He concludes this section with a powerful statement about the gospel that has been revealed to him. It is the “power of God to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and then to the Greek.” (Romans 1:16-17)

Most of those who graduate today will be serving in local churches. The church you are about to enter is very different from the church I entered in 1972.

In 1965, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) had a combined membership of 4.2 million members. At the end of 2007, that membership had declined to 2.2 million members. That represents a loss of 2 million members in the past forty-four years.

Moreover, the church, which many of you are serving, is a church that is bitterly divided, particularly on a number of issues that center on human sexuality—specifically, abortion and the ordination of active homosexuals.

But as grim as these facts may seem, they do not tell the whole story. There are a significant number of churches today that are dynamic, growing, and filled with members of all ages. There is today within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) a deep hungering for matters of faith, and the opportunity for ministry that is greater today than at any time in my ministry.

So, this morning I would like to propose to you four theses that deal with the “Hazards and Joys of Christian Ministry.”

II.

The first that ministry is first a foremost a vocation. It is a calling. Many ministers today prefer to be called professionals, but there is a danger in that it promotes a sense of self-importance and entitlement that is foreign to authentic ministry. Ministry, at its heart, is a calling of service to God and to other people. The words of Jesus are the controlling words of ministry today as for every day. “The Son of Man came to serve and not to be served.” That is our vocation.

One of the impressive things about entering the Mackay Campus Center at Princeton Seminary is a series of plaques that are on the wall to the entrance of the center. The plaques commemorate a number of students who have given their lives in service to the gospel of Jesus Christ. One of the plaques reads as follows:

OF THESE THE WORLD WAS NOT WORTHY

WALTER MACON LOWRIE class of 1840

Thrown overboard by pirates in the China Sea 1847

JOHN EDGAR FREEMAN class of 1838

ROBERT MCMULLIN class of 1853

Who with their wives were shot by the order of

Nana Sahib 1857 at Cawnpore India

LEVI JANVIER class of 1840

Stabbed by a Sikh fanatic at Lodiana India 1864

ISIDOR SOEWENTHAL class of 1854

Shot accidentally or by design at Peshawar India

JOHN ROGERS PEALE class of 1905

Killed with his wife by a mob at Lien Chou China 1905

There are other plaques as well with names on them like Elijah Lovejoy—a Princeton Seminary graduate who ran an abolitionist printing press in Missouri, and who was killed by an angry pro-slavery mob who then burned down his printing press; and James Reeb who in 1965 answered the call of Martin Luther King, Jr. to come to Selma, Alabama to help register African Americans to vote and who was beaten to death on his first day of work.

The point, of course, is that ministry is sometimes a dangerous work and the sacrifices that men and women have made to this calling have been immense. For that reason, I am always leery of those who believe this is simply another profession—like business, medicine, or law, or that you can recruit young ministers to this profession in the same way that investment bankers are recruited. Ministry is a profession that requires a great deal of skill and education and one that has its own standards and guidelines, but it is at its heart a calling by God and it is one that none of us should take lightly.

III.

The second thesis is that the church today is called to a mission that is countercultural. The Reformed faith, to use the typology of H. Richard Niebuhr, is called to an ethic of “transforming society.”

Nowhere is that more evident than in the arena of worship. We are living today in a consumer culture that places a great deal of value on the preacher as entertainer. Many people come to worship seeking personal fulfillment and entertainment. Central to the Reformed faith is the notion that the object of worship is God.

Reformed theology, at its heart, is theocentric. It focuses on God. The God with whom we have to do is the Creator of the heaven and earth, who maintains all things in their being and who governs them by his will. God is energy, force, and life. God is purpose, intention and will. He is the Lord God, who “comes with might,” “who measures out the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span.” (Isaiah 40: 10, 12, 17) This is the Creator God whom we are called to worship.

The theocentric character of the Reformed faith sets it over against every ethic of self-realization, against inordinate concern with the salvation of one’s own soul, and against excessive preoccupation with the questions of personal identity.

This notion of the majesty of God is implied in the question once asked in the Church of Scotland to every candidate for ministry: “Are you willing to be damned for the glory of God?”

Whatever one may think about that question, it was a conscious attempt to root out the last element of self-seeking in religion.

That is why in our worship we must make every attempt to focus the attention of the worshipper on God. Worship is not about the preacher, the music, or the worshipper—important as these may be. It is fundamentally our attempt to focus attention on the God who encounters us in Jesus Christ.

For that reason, I have enjoyed the story once told by Marva Dawn, who related a time when, after a worship service a man greeted her at the door by saying, “I didn’t like that last hymn.” She replied, “We didn’t sing it to you.”

IV.

The third thesis that I would place before you is the conviction that ministers today are called “to build up” churches. That is not an expression that one hears today in the church. Many of us prefer to view ourselves as great preachers, pastors, prophets, or social critics. But there is a fundamental task to the ministry of building up the body of Christ.

That is inherent in Paul’s letter to the church at Rome. In this introduction to his letter Paul states that he was not “ashamed of the gospel.” He was certainly not afraid that the gospel that he preached would not be able to meet the challenge of the most powerful city in the world. Nor was he afraid that the Gospel might not be equal to its encounter with the accumulated culture and vulgarity of that metropolis. The reason why he is “shameless,” and why he is not afraid of all Rome is because the Gospel itself is power; it is God’s power, and therefore in every respect superior power. It is not one power among other powers, it is not a power to which other powers could even be compared, it is not a power with which another power could compete but the power which is over and above all other powers, which limits and governs them all. (Luther) How could the messenger of that Gospel be ashamed?

That is why the church today needs to recover the role of evangelism in its ministry. John Calvin devoted more than one fourth of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* to what he called the “external means of grace.” For Calvin, evangelism was understood as incorporating individuals into the community of faith where the Word of God is preached and the sacraments are celebrated. For Calvin, the notion of private Christianity was no more a possibility than it was for the early church.

Today, ministers need to take seriously the responsibility of evangelism and of building up the church. The membership losses in the Presbyterian Church are serious, and unless these are addressed, all else that we do will ultimately not matter.

Today ministers struggle with conflicting roles. Many see themselves as agents of change, social activists, and community agitators. These roles may be important from time to

time but they are not the essential roles of ministers. The essential functions of a minister are preaching, teaching, and pastoral care. Included in these are the responsibilities for gathering a congregation.

Recently, I came across an article by Craig Barnes of Pittsburgh Seminary entitled “Sometimes Ministry Stinks.” Barnes recalled a time when, as a young minister, he visited Bryant Kirkland, who for a number of years was minister of the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City. Barnes was discouraged in his ministry and sought the advice of an older, more mature minister. Kirkland told Barnes of a time when his wife was in the hospital, giving birth to one of their children. Kirkland was particularly impressed with the care of the nurses. They were thoughtful, considerate, and compassionate. When he commented on this to one of the head supervisors, she said, “We tell our nurses that there are a lot of smelly jobs in our profession, but every job can be conducted with dignity.” “Our motto,” the supervisor said, “is this: If you get stuck holding a bedpan, carry it like a queen. Then the focus is not on the bedpan, but on the graciousness of the one who is holding it.”

Craig Barnes went on to say that there are a lot of smelly jobs in pastoral ministry. For example, churches often attract odd people. That is our business. One seminary professor said, “If you want to be the light of the world, you have to expect a few moths.” Sometimes there are smelly jobs in ministry. Sometimes a minister has to fire an unproductive staff member, meet with chronic complainers, wade into conflicts with leaders, and represent unpopular changes being proposed by the church board. These are smelly jobs, but someone has to do them, and often that someone is the one person who is actually paid to come to church.

V.

The fourth thesis that I would share with you is that ministry brings with it its own rewards that are multiplied many times over whatever hazards and burdens we may encounter along the way.

That is certainly the thrust of Paul’s message to the church at Rome. When Paul speaks of the Gospel as the “power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith,” he is saying something that no other profession or calling can claim.

At the end of the day, the ministry is a blessed vocation, not because of the worth of those who practice it, but because of the power of God that vindicates it over every other power in the world. It is the power of God for salvation.

Karl Barth, in his famous *Shorter Commentary on Romans* has a quote that is appropriate for this occasion, when he says, “There is no sentence that starts with ‘I’ and finishes somewhere with salvation and liberty.” The only sentences, observes Barth, that end with salvation and liberty are those that begin with Jesus Christ. He is, for all of us, the “way, the truth, and the life.”

Several weeks ago, Dean Thomas Currie spoke to the Church in Vocation group in Charlotte about ministry today. In that address, Dean Currie spoke of the embarrassment that ministers sometimes feel about this particular profession. This is certainly true today when the newspapers are filled with stories about exorbitant salaries for ministers and the corruption that inevitably comes with this abuse of power. But Dean Currie concluded his remarks by observing that the greatest embarrassment that ministry knows is the embarrassment of riches. That is its great secret. Not that ministry is not hard or frustrating or lonely at times. It is.

But rather the great joy of this particular calling is that all who enter this ministry enter into the ministry of Christ, and he is rich and gives lavishly. He is there with us during the storms of life, rebuking the winds and the waves. He is with us on the hillside when there is nothing to eat and thousands are looking for us to feed them. He is there even when ministry seems so difficult and lonely, when criticism and complaints appear on every side. Even in these times, we know that in truth it is all a gift, and we have received more than we have ever given.

So, to all who are beginning today a new part of their ministry we extend a word of welcome to the joy that has been prepared for you.

Amen!