

Exodus 18:13-27 1 Corinthians 12:1-11 January 16, 2022
The Ordination and Installation of Ruling Elders
Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

FROM THE ONE, MANY

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

We're hearing much in the news these days about a labor shortage. Here's a job offer for you:



Here's another job description for the Perfect Pastor:

The perfect pastor preaches exactly ten minutes.
She condemns sin roundly, but never hurts anyone's feelings.
She works from 8:00 a.m. until 12 midnight and is also the church janitor.

The perfect pastor makes \$40 a week, wears good clothes, drives a good car, buys good books, and donates \$30 a week to the church.

She is 29 years old and has forty years of experience.
She never forgets a name and spends most of her time praying to God.

She also knows when somebody is sick and needs visitation, even without anyone telling her about it.

She loves to spend time with her family, and the perfect pastor has no problem with you dropping in unexpectedly.

She spends most of her time preparing to preach God's Word.

Before and after Sunday worship services, she never fails to speak to each person present and will also take the time to listen to you for fifteen minutes and pray for each person for no less than ten minutes after listening to them. When she's done with that, she goes out to eat lunch with each individual family and also pays for all of their meals.

The perfect pastor always smiles and tells you what you want to hear.

She eats nutritiously, gets her rest, exercises daily, and is always there to listen to you night or day.

She has a burning desire to work with teenagers and spends most of her time with the senior citizens.

She smiles all the time with a straight face because she has a sense of humor that keeps her seriously dedicated to the church.

The perfect pastor makes fifteen home visits each day and is always on call in her study.

She takes family vacations and attends all of the latest church and ministers' conferences.

The perfect pastor listens to your favorite TV preachers and is completely up-to-date on each prominent TV preacher's messages.

She doesn't want to overburden the church budget, so she also holds down a second full-time job.

She never spends your tithes and offerings on her children's Baskin Robbins ice cream cones.

The perfect pastor is always serving in the church just down the road.

If your pastor doesn't measure up, simply send this notice to six other churches that are also tired of their pastors. Then bundle up your pastor and send her to the church at the top of the list. If everyone cooperates, in one week you will receive 1,643 pastors. One of them should be perfect. Have faith in this letter. One church broke the chain and got its old pastor back in less than three months!¹

That sounds similar to the job description Moses must have been using out there in the wilderness with the children of Israel: "The next day Moses sat as judge for the people, while the people stood around him from morning until evening. When Moses' father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, 'What is this that you are doing for the people? Why do you sit alone, while all the people stand around you from morning until evening?' Moses said to his father-in-law, 'Because the people come to me to inquire of God. When they have a dispute, they come to me and I decide between one person and another, and I make known to them the statutes and instructions of God.' Moses' father-in-law said to

him, ‘What you are doing is not good. You will surely wear yourself out, both you and these people with you. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone.’” (Exodus 18:13-18)

And so, Moses chose elders to share God’s work with him and they bore the burden together. On this Sunday when we ordain and install Ruling Elders in the Class of 2024, we are reminded from our Presbyterian *Book of Order* that, “As there were in Old Testament times elders for the government of the people, so the New Testament church provided persons with particular gifts to share in discernment of God’s Spirit and governance of God’s people. Accordingly, congregations should elect persons of wisdom and maturity of faith, having demonstrated skills in leadership and being compassionate in spirit. . . Ruling elders, together with ministers of the Word and Sacrament, exercise leadership, government, spiritual discernment, and discipline and have responsibilities for the life of a congregation.” (Section G-2.03)

However, just as one person or leader doesn’t have all of the necessary gifts and can’t do everything on his or her own in the church, neither does our session have all of the gifts necessary for the health and well-being, the mission and ministry of the Wallace Presbyterian Church. What the apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in first century Corinth about being the church is just as true today in twenty-first century Wallace: “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.” (1 Corinthians 12:4-6)

There is one source, God’s grace at work in and through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, and there are many, varied gifts. Just think about our congregation. Think about everything that happens here to make this living, viable organism an instrument of God’s outreach and mission. Think about all of the gifts and talents and time and energy and effort that all of you put into the life and work of this congregation. No one person should do it alone. No one person can do it alone.

The church needs all of the spiritual gifts our members can contribute. Nancy and I enjoy putting jigsaw puzzles together on the dining room table. A few years ago, we put together a particularly difficult puzzle. You know how you start putting pieces in place faster and faster the closer you get to being done? Well, we were really closing in on the last piece – and we couldn’t find it! We looked everywhere, but the missing piece was not to be found. So, we stood there and looked at an almost complete puzzle, but the hole where that missing piece was supposed to go looked as big as the Grand Canyon! That’s sorta how it is when folks don’t contribute

their spiritual gifts to the church's mission. The church isn't as complete and effective as it could be.

Of course, the reverse is also true. The story is told of a man who had grown lackadaisical in his involvement in the church. The pastor knew that he hadn't seen the gentleman in a while, so he went for a visit. The man greeted the pastor, welcomed him in, and directed him to the chair beside the fireplace. He asked the pastor what brought him to visit, but the pastor didn't say a word. He simply grabbed the fireplace tongs, picked up a hot coal from the fire, and set it away from the fire, out on the hearth. Both men then watched the coal.

While the fire roared on, the coal which had been red hot began to lose its heat. It gradually lost its red color, and then cooled off so that it became cool to the touch. The pastor picked up the coal and handed it to the man for a moment. Neither man said a word. Then the pastor reached out and took the coal back from the man and returned it to the roaring fire. In just a few short moments, the coal once again glowed red hot, as the pile of flaming coals caused it to heat up again. The pastor then got to his feet, put his hat on, and shook the man's hand. At that point, the man looked at the pastor and said, "Thank you for coming, pastor. I'll be back in church this coming Sunday!" One way to sum up that story is the old saying: There is no such thing as a Lone Ranger Christian!

That's why the key verse in today's New Testament reading is verse 7: "To **each** is given the manifestation of the Spirit for **the common good**." Here's how Richard Hayes, Professor Emeritus of New Testament at Duke Divinity School, explains the importance of each and every one of us adding our spiritual gifts to the life of the church: "All members of the community receive gifts of the Spirit, not just a few leaders or spiritually super-endowed prodigies; furthermore, the whole purpose of God's distribution of these gifts is for the benefit of the community as a whole, not merely the private edification of the individuals who receive the gifts . . . The possession of any gift is therefore not a matter of individual merit or worthiness but of the sheer free grace of God. All the manifestations of the Spirit are to serve God's purpose for the common benefit of the community."²

Years ago, when I was faced with an important decision about my ministry, a trusted friend and mentor suggested I read a short devotion about "vocation," written by Frederick Buechner. All these years later, I remember the gist of the devotion, but I remember one sentence verbatim: "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

As we ordain and install Joyce, Danielle, and Curt as Ruling Elders this morning, I charge all of us to think seriously about Buechner's phrase and to localize it to our church and its mission. Where is God calling you to contribute your gift in our ministry? In everything we try to do as a congregation of Jesus Christ, where can your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet? That sounds awfully daunting, doesn't it? But remember, our Lord told us not to hide our light under a bushel basket, but to let it shine in everything we do.

For you see, one and the same God, Lord, and Holy Spirit gives us many gifts for the ministry we are called to do as the Wallace Presbyterian Church. Each of you has been given a gift for the common good. The church needs you! And, dare I say it, you need the church, so together we can be the body of Christ . . .

. . . and we'll hear more about that next Sunday!

Let us pray: Mighty and merciful God, you have called us to be your people and claimed us for the service of Jesus Christ. We have been forgetful of your powerful presence and the strength of your Spirit among us. Give us your Holy Spirit that each one in ministry may be provided with all the gifts of grace needed to fulfill our common calling; through Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. Amen.

NOTES

¹Raymond C. Osborne, "Job Description for the Perfect Pastor," February 11, 2006 at the "Words of Grace" blog at www.wordsofgrace.blogspot.com.

²Richard B. Hayes, *First Corinthians* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), pp. 211, 212-213.