

Exodus 18:13-27

Acts 6:1-7

January 7, 2018

The Ordination and Installation of Elders

The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

SELECTED TO SERVE

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.

When I was a commissioner from the Presbytery of Coastal Carolina to the 220th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in Pittsburgh, I served on the Church Orders and Ministry Committee. One of the items of business on our docket that week was how to refer to people who are ordained to positions of leadership in congregations in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). An overture was submitted to the General Assembly to amend the *Book of Order* to replace the terms “teaching elder” and “ruling elder” with “minister of Word and Sacrament” and “elder.” Part of the rationale for the proposed amendment said, “the word ‘ruling’ evokes an authoritarianism that is foreign to the ‘ministry’ of elders in the current church. In historical Presbyterian practice in Britain and the U.S., the ‘ruling elders’ truly ruled, primarily as a disciplinary court. Old session minutes are often dominated by cases of Sabbath breaking, drunkenness, swearing, adultery, fornication, and other infractions by members of congregations, answered by various forms of public repentance imposed by the local session. The ‘ruling elders’ of old even ruled on who was deemed to be duly prepared and ready to receive the Lord’s Supper every time (annually or quarterly) that it was dispensed.”¹ The committee debated the overture and, ultimately, recommended to the entire General Assembly that the recommendation not be approved.

Today we ordain and install Christy, Clay, Dan, Dottie, and Michael as “ruling elders” in the church of Jesus Christ and for the Wallace Presbyterian Church. According to our church’s *Book of Order*, “Ruling elders are so named not because they ‘lord it over’ the congregation, but because they are chosen by the congregation to discern and measure its fidelity to the Word of God, and to strengthen and nurture its faith and life.”²

Several years ago, as the session talked about what it means to be a “ruling elder,” one of the elders asked, “How in the world are we supposed to discern and measure the congregation’s fidelity to the Word of God?” That’s a great question! That’s also one of the primary responsibilities that your elders and I have. Speaking as the moderator of the session, I can say that

your elders take their responsibility to “rule” very seriously – not in the sense of “lording it over the congregation,” but, as described in an article about ordination, “ruling out or measuring the work of ministry, the fidelity of communal and personal lives, and the progress of the gospel in the church.”³

I have yet to work with any ruling elders in the Wallace Presbyterian Church who want to “lord it over the congregation.” As part of their session examination for ordination and installation, the newly elected elders are asked to share their stories of their faith journeys and to answer the question, “Why did you say yes when you were asked to serve as an elder?” Hearing their stories and reasons for serving is a highlight of the year. Year after year, the men and women you elect to serve as ruling elders consistently share a desire to serve our Lord Jesus Christ, the people of this congregation, our surrounding community, and the world at large.

Presbyterians are known for doing things “decently and in order.” That’s why we talk about “orders of ministries.” But there is no hierarchy of power and prestige. The “orders of ministries” have to do with particular functions in the life of the church. All Christians are called to service in the name of Jesus Christ. That work isn’t just for ordained teaching elders and ruling elders. But there are particular ministries and jobs to be done in the church, and from the beginning the church has set aside people for those particular tasks.

In the book of Acts, we read about the new church experiencing growing pains. Some Greek speaking Jewish Christians thought their widows were being neglected in the distribution of food. They shared their concern with the twelve apostles. Instead of getting defensive, ignoring the problem, or saying, “We’ll just do it ourselves,” the apostles came up with a good idea that pleased the whole church. Seven men were called out and designated to take care of the specific ministry to the widows. That left the apostles free to devote themselves to prayer and to serving the word. We shouldn’t read into this story some order of importance of tasks in the church. The apostles weren’t saying, “We’ll take care of the more important jobs; we can’t be bothered with the more menial tasks.” Instead, they recognized the importance of shared ministry and the church calling people out to be responsible for particular ministries.

The New Testament division of labor is very similar to Jethro’s advice to his son-in-law Moses. Jethro saw Moses trying to do everything by himself and asked, “What is this that you are doing for the people? 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 18:14, 17-18)

That’s why we elect elders each fall, and I’m glad we do! The task is too heavy for me, I cannot do it alone. Each year I am excited to get the phone call or email from the chairperson of the Nominating Committee telling me we have a slate of nominees to present to the congregation. Just the other day someone asked me, “Do you feel good about the folks who are coming on the session?” I enthusiastically said, “Yes,” and then I added, “I always feel good about the folks who come on the session, because the congregation always elects men and women who are committed to the ministry and the task of being an elder.”

When the apostles suggested to the church that they select seven men to serve, they encouraged them to select people of “good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom.” (Acts 6:3) Our *Book of Order* says “congregations should elect persons of wisdom and maturity of faith, having demonstrated skills in leadership and being compassionate in spirit . . . [They] should be persons of strong faith, dedicated discipleship, and love of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Their manner of life should be a demonstration of the Christian gospel in the church and in the world.”⁴

Without fail, elders-elect say to me every year, “I don’t think I’m worthy to be an elder.” I always answer, “You’re not. And I’m not worthy to be a minister. And none of us is worthy of God’s grace. But God chooses to work through us in his Church. God gives us the spiritual gifts we need to do the jobs God calls us to do.” I always tell the ruling elders, “Remember, the congregation elected you to serve because they see in you the qualities and characteristics needed in leaders of God’s people.” That’s why we talk about elders being “called by God through the voice of this congregation.”

Now let me remind all of us – we haven’t elected ruling elders to do all of the work and ministry for us. We have elected them to **lead** us all in the work and ministry God calls us to do. In our baptisms, God puts a claim on our lives, a claim of grace and love and a call to service. In a few minutes, Jason will ask you two questions as part of the ordination/installation ceremony. Will you accept these men and women as elders? Will you encourage them, respect their decisions, and follow as they guide us, serving Jesus Christ, who alone is Head of the Church?

We are all called to serve our Lord Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God that some are selected to serve as ruling elders, to guide us and nurture our faith and discern and measure our fidelity to the Word of God.

Let us pray: Lord, strengthen the faith of your people through word and sacrament. Bless the members of our congregation that they may be salt and light in the world. Guide our elders as they nurture us in our faith and lead us in service to Christ our Lord and the people of this world. Amen.

NOTES

¹Minutes of the 220th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), p. 676.

²PCUSA *Book of Order*, G-2.0301 Ruling Elder Defined.

³Joseph D. Small, "Ordination," at www.oga.pcusa.org/section/mid-council-ministries/ministers/ordination/

⁴ PCUSA *Book of Order*, G-2.0301 Ruling Elder Defined and G-2.0104 Gifts and Qualifications