

Made a Minister

Ephesians 3:1-8

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Forty years ago, the second Sunday of January was a cold, snowy day. That's when I preached my first sermon. I was a freshman in high school. Young as I was, I was already in ministry before that. And, important as preaching is, I discovered that ministry involves much more than preaching. But preaching that sermon was a step into a unique kind of ministry.

God calls all of us to ministry. To be a Christian is to be a minister. I don't want us to lose sight of that. But today, I want to focus on the call to the special ministry we call *ordained ministry*. My prayer is that some of you will become aware of God calling you to this kind of ministry. Or, if you've already felt that call, that this will encourage you to answer it. And I do want all of us to remember that God is calling us all to minister in some way.

Following God's call to ministry is a difficult and wonderful life. It's both a high privilege and a deep responsibility. There's nothing like it. Bob Tuttle used to say to us in seminary classes, "Why stoop to be a king when we can preach the gospel?"

What does God's call sound like? What does it feel like to be called? How do you know when and where you're being called?

Part of how I began to realize that I was called to this ministry came as I sat in church listening to our pastor and thinking how I would do it better. Most of your hearts probably just skipped a beat. If that's the only qualification, you figure you must be called right now!

Really that pastor, Chester Garver, was a pretty good preacher. And he taught me a lot about ministry in other ways and gave me many opportunities to be in ministry as I was learning and growing into the idea of being a preacher and pastor.

I learned a lot watching and listening to other preachers. I still do. Not that you try to imitate someone else or repeat their sermons word for word. But there's something about the best and most appealing preachers I've known that rubs off on you. You pick up little bits of style and insights and ways of looking at the Bible and life that you use. But then you put it

together with your own personality and gifts and situation—and God makes you a minister.

One preacher I learned a lot from was Larry Lacour. He was a chaplain during World War II and then went to Japan as a missionary after the war. He was an evangelist in Iowa and later was the head of the Board of Evangelism for the Methodist Church. He pastored First UMC in Colorado Springs for several years. Then he went to Oral Roberts University to teach preaching. While at ORU, three seminary faculty members, including Dr. Lacour, started a new UM church in south Tulsa. From about the middle of my sophomore year till I graduated, that was where I went to church.

One Sunday, Dr. Lacour preached on this text from Ephesians. He was celebrating his fiftieth year in ministry then. And he preached on "I Was Made a Minister." I want to borrow his outline (using someone else's stuff!) to talk about what Paul says here and to tell my own story about being made a minister of the gospel.

Paul starts with the *Message*. What God has done in Jesus Christ is the gospel for the Apostle Paul. Then he talks about what God had given him—the grace to be a steward and servant of the gospel, the good news. God gave Paul insight into what God was up to. God showed Paul a revelation of God's grace.

God didn't blind me and knock me to the ground like he did Paul on the road to Damascus. My experience was more of an Emmaus road than a Damascus road experience. In that story in Luke's Gospel (ch 24), Jesus appears to two disciples after his resurrection. They don't recognize him, so he walks with them and talks with them about the events of his own death and resurrection and about what the Old Testament Scriptures said. Then he went into their house at their invitation and began to eat with them. When he said the blessing and broke the bread, "their eyes were opened and they recognized him." Then they ran back to Jerusalem to tell the good news that they had seen the Lord alive.

My experience is also more like Paul's young associate Timothy. His grandmother and his mother had sincere faith. Timothy learned the Scriptures as a child. Then came the day when he made the faith his own.

He was challenged to make a commitment and to join Paul in traveling the world preaching the good news and overseeing churches.

Involvement in the church has always been part of my life. People in my family for several generations back have been committed to Christ and the church. I learned the songs and stories in Sunday School and Vacation Bible School. There were people in my family held up as examples of faith and life in Christ.

But the pull of sin was also there. Looking back, I see in myself potential for (and some actual) meanness and cruelty, selfishness and arrogance. If I'd made different choices, if my life had gone different directions, if God's grace hadn't kept me, it could have been disastrous.

But God's grace did keep me and help me. And at a young age, I heard the gospel in a way that appealed to me, that made it personal. And I made the faith my own. That's not how I would have said it then. I just knew that I was inviting Jesus into my heart because I wanted to be forgiven and go to heaven.

Opening the door of my heart to Jesus opened up all kinds of things. That "yes" entailed other "yeses." I began to be a follower of Jesus. I tried to pray more intelligently and faithfully. I tried to read the Bible more. I learned that witnessing—telling others about Jesus—is something Christians do. But I didn't really know how to do that and I lacked motivation and power.

Paul says he was called, he was made a minister, because of the *grace of God* that was given to him. And that grace was made effective by the *empowering of the Holy Spirit*. Often when Paul speaks of God's grace, he's referring to the Holy Spirit.

When I was thirteen, I heard about the experience of being filled with the Holy Spirit. The more I heard people's testimonies and what the Bible said about this, the more I said, "This is what I need. How do I get it?" My brother and some of his friends led me in that experience. A simple prayer—"Lord, fill me with your Spirit"—opened me up to God's presence, grace, and power in a new way. It was renewing. The Holy Spirit gave the motivation and the power I needed.

It didn't take long for me to begin sharing what I was experiencing and learning. I had various opportunities to do that. It seemed natural to speak and share that way.

The next parts of the outline are not directly from the text, but we can find them in Paul's story told in Acts and his letters. Paul was called and made a minister by God's grace and power in Jesus Christ and by *caring Christian people*. Ananias was a disciple in Damascus. After Paul's encounter with the Lord on the way to Damascus, the Lord sent Ananias to Paul to pray for him, baptize him, and encourage him. And Ananias went. There was Barnabas, who later brought Paul to Antioch where he became a leader in the church and from where he was sent on his mission trips. There were Silas and Timothy and Titus and Priscilla and Aquila—and many others who helped Paul.

Who helped you come to know God? Who encourages you in your life in Christ? Who do you respect and trust, and they encourage you about your ministry, your service? Maybe they even encourage you to pray about ordained ministry.

I've mentioned my family and Sunday School teachers and my pastor during my high school years. They were very important in my coming to faith and in my becoming an ordained minister. There were, and are, many others. Warren McEwan, a good friend of our family, was the custodian at school when I was in junior high. He was a godly man. He did a little devotional time in the cafeteria before school started each morning. I started going to it around the time I had that new experience of the Holy Spirit. One day he asked if I would prepare and present a devotion. So a few days later, I did. I just talked a little bit about what had been happening in my life and about a verse of Scripture. Then I started praying with Warren in the furnace room each day before the devotional time. That was a great time of learning and trying out ministry.

My dad started a businessmen's prayer breakfast along about that same time. I went with him to that. Everyone there took turns bringing a study or devotion each week. There was more growing and practicing for me. Wilbur Zink, my grandfather's cousin and the local Ford dealer, was in that group. He was preaching each Sunday at a little Christian church in the

country a few miles from town. He asked me to come and preach for him. And that was my first sermon.

The text was Acts 4:20 where Peter and John tell the Sanhedrin, "We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard." My title was "Seeing Jesus." I talked about the disciples seeing and hearing Jesus as the incarnate word, his teaching, his healing, his death and resurrection. Someday, "every eye will see him" (Revelation 1:7). In the meantime, we hear God's still small voice in our hearts. We see Jesus in forgiveness and transformed lives. We see and hear him through the Holy Spirit.

Another Christian Church pastor, Clyde Merriman, invited me to preach for him from time to time. My best friend's father was preaching at a Baptist Church in the country and he used to let me preach there once in a while. He always called me "Timothy." I was involved in United Methodist Youth and helped out on youth Sundays in my home church. There were other pastors who invited me to fill their pulpits from time to time.

All of that helped set the course for my life. I felt at home preparing and preaching sermons. I went to college to study theology and to prepare for seminary. There were many opportunities during college to learn about and be in ministry.

The summer after college I worked as a youth director at First UMC, Moore, OK. That's Nancy's home church. I met her that summer. She ended up working with the youth group. We got to know each other and decided we wanted to keep getting to know each other. So I stayed in Tulsa for my first year of seminary and we saw each other on the weekends. The next year we got married and she joined me in ministry. Being married to a pastor is a calling and may take more grace and power of the Holy Spirit than being a pastor does.

Ordinary people have helped me. God uses ordinary people. God can use you to encourage and support someone in this way. We can encourage each other to hear and respond to God's call. We can give people opportunities to do what they believe God wants them to do. We can affirm people when they take that step of faith. We can offer direction as people seek God's plan for their lives.

Paul was called/made a minister by God's grace and power, by caring Christian people and by *the church*. A group of Jesus' followers in Damascus first helped Paul. The church in Jerusalem affirmed him. The church in Antioch became his home base—they prayed for him, received his teaching, set him apart, and commissioned him as a missionary.

We need the church. God has chosen to do ministry through the church. When God calls us to a particular kind of ministry, we hear that call partly through the church. And the church affirms us as we seek to fulfill that call. The church offers us the wisdom of its history and the vitality of its present fellowship with the living Lord.

As I said, the church has always been a strong presence in my life. I was born into a family that was active in church. I learned the Bible and Christian faith and how to relate to God's people and the world in the church. I was baptized in the church. My local church affirmed me as I began the process of going into ordained ministry. We were married in the church. Our children were baptized in the church. I was ordained in and by the church.

Ordination is how the church recognizes and affirms God's call in some people's lives. We who are ordained are set apart for the special ministry of Word (preaching and teaching), Sacrament (baptism and communion), Order (equipping God's people for their ministry and service), and Service (we can never forget that we are servants of God, of the Gospel, of the people of God) (*The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* 2012, paragraph 332).

In ordained ministry we get to be with people when God works in their lives in special ways: Baptism, Confirmation, when people are making decisions about committing their lives to Christ, Healing, Weddings, Funerals. One of the things I discovered early on doing funerals is that I'm privileged to stand with people in their grief. At first I wasn't comfortable with that. I thought I didn't have any business there. But that's part of what I'm called and authorized for. I've learned to accept that and let God work through me in those moments.

Finally, Paul and we are called/made ministers by *commitment*. This is where we decide what we're going to do about God's call. I didn't really

think about being called when I was young. I just found myself doing some things and discovered that they were ways I could serve God and be myself. I'm still growing in my understanding of God's call and my response to it.

How does it feel to be called? It's exciting, scary, awesome, challenging, fulfilling. You step into those situations where you can try out the gifts God has given you and you find God at work through you. You try out what you believe God wants you to do. Sometimes you succeed and sometimes you fail. But you keep experimenting and discovering who you are and what God has for you to do.

Commitment also keeps us going in ministry. Our own commitment causes us to hang in there. But also when people commit themselves to Jesus at least in part because of our ministry—that energizes us and keeps us going.

I want to close with another preacher's story. I've tried to tell mine. But this one also speaks to me, and it just might speak to you.

Fred Craddock says that ministers as a lot are strange. He learned this between his junior and senior years of school at summer camp. A minister who was a counselor at that camp asked Fred one evening, "Have you ever considered being a minister?"

Fred said, "No sir, never, never have."

I was seventeen, about to begin my senior year in high school, and he ruined everything for me. What a thing to lay on a kid. All I wanted to do was to go where the girls were, save some money to get a car, go to school some more, someday get married, have a house, a garden, and two weeks of vacation in the summer. What else is there? And then he lays that on me. I thought about it when I got up in the morning; I thought about it when I went to bed at night.

I am still thinking about it. He was a minister, and he did that.

Fred says that at that same camp they had a night of consecration around the lake, and candlelight, and it was so moving. They sang, "Are Ye Able?" Fred went back to the dorm and lay on his bunk and said to God, "I'm able." "Are you able to give your life?" "I'll give my life,"

... and I pictured myself running in front of a train and rescuing a child, swimming out and getting someone who was drowning.

I pictured myself against a gray wall and some soldier saying, "One last chance to deny Christ and live." I confessed my faith, and they said, "Ready, aim, fire." The body slumped, the flag was at half mast, and widows were weeping in the afternoon. Later a monument is built, and people come with their cameras. "Johnny, you stand over there where Fred gave his life. Let's get your picture."

I was sincere then, as I have been these forty-five years since. "I give my life," but nobody warned me that I could not write one big check. I've had to write forty-five years of little checks: 87 cents, 21 cents, a dollar three cents. Just nibbled away at this giving of life. (*Craddock Stories*, 136-37, 155)

What about you? How is God calling you? Where is God calling you? Are you willing to give your life to God? Will you say, "Here I am, Lord," take me, send me?