

Embracing the Challenge

Preached At Presbytery

January 22, 2008

Much of what I know about the Christian ministry, I learned from my father and my mother. My parents were ordained Elders, not clergy, but they were still my guides. Both were rock-solid lay members of the local Presbyterian church. As a child, it seemed to me like we were ALWAYS at the church – the first to arrive and the last to leave! Born in Scotland, and immigrating to the US at age 12, my dad was a presbyterian from cradle to grave. Raised a Lutheran my mother came to the presbyterian persuasion a bit later, but she still had a profound understanding of the Reformed brand of Christianity. Long before I was ordained, my mother taught me that preachers are not infallible. One of the family legends concerns a heated discussion my mother had with our local pastor. They didn't agree on some theological issue, and, in the heat of the argument the minister pointed out that perhaps my mother was not listening to what he said in his sermon the previous Sunday. "Oh, I heard just fine," said my mom, "but that doesn't mean I agree with you." "You were wrong then, and you're still wrong!"

From my dad, I learned conflict management. My father was one of those life-long clerks of session. He would serve two consecutive terms on session and then take his mandatory year off, but often he stayed on as clerk through that sabbatical year as well. Looking back at my home church, I understand now that it was a highly conflicted church. There were at least two, very well defined groups in that congregation, which did not agree with each other on most issues. Over the course of twenty or thirty years, that congregation ground up and spit out several ministers; but, (and this fascinates me) during that same period they also inspired at least three young people to enter the ministry – go figure! In the middle of all that conflict, my father was the mediator. I remember one night overhearing his side of a telephone conversation with one of the pillars of the church – a very formidable woman who headed one of the factions in the church. And I heard my father say: "Helen, you can't do that. It would be a dumb thing to do!" Now, I was old enough, and knew enough about the church, to appreciate that this was not the most tactful way to talk with anyone, and especially not Helen! But my dad got away with it. And why?

He could say that to Helen because everyone knew that he would be just as direct with the leaders of the other side of this question, whatever it was. Everyone knew that my father was even-handed and fair, and could be counted on to be honest. He was working for the good of the church, and both sides respected him. He had integrity! He had a desire to be faithful to God, and he worked to keep the church faithful to God. My mother taught me ministerial humility; and my father taught me about conflict and integrity. You do not have to agree with the position of another person in order to work with them, but you have to work with openness and humility!

In thinking about this call as General Presbyter, I come to you with a full measure of humility; and I promise to do everything in my power to work with honesty and integrity. As I thought about our worship this afternoon, my eye fell on the Epistle lessons for last Sunday and this coming Sunday. The lessons come from the first chapter of 1 Corinthians. Paul offers his

greetings to the church of God in Corinth and to all those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. This was a lofty and optimistic greeting, because Paul was writing to a group of Christians who were struggling to stay together. There were problems in that faith community! The people were divided on all kinds of issues.

I love the letters of Paul, partly because they help me understand the church today. Most of us have this illusion that the early church was wonderful! Those first Christians, who receive their introduction to Christ right from Jesus, or right from the Apostles – they surely lived in a special time for the church! But, as we study the letters of Paul, we come to understand that they were usually written in response to some crisis, some problem in the church. At Corinth there were all kinds of issues! So Paul begins with this reminder of their call – you are called to be saints TOGETHER! You are part of something bigger than yourself, bigger than your own issue *de jour*. Let's take up Paul's letter at vs 10 – the lesson for this coming Sunday.

Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." (This reminds me of my home church!) Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. [Oops!, I just remembered] (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power. For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

I love the personal nature of this letter – it's almost like Paul is talking to his friends. Even that little "oops" as he remembers one more person he baptized, gives the letter a "folksy" feeling. It may be folksy, but Paul is addressing some very real concerns and serious challenges. How is he going to help the church he loves, and the people he loves . . . How is he going to help them understand that they are stronger together than they are apart? How is he going to help them understand that the body of Christ cannot be divided! How is he going to help them realize that their differences might actually be a blessing and not a curse? With their various gifts, and even in their opposing positions on the issues, they are made stronger!

One way he begins to work on the problem is to point out his own limitations. He notes that his own primary gift is that he is an traveling evangelist. "Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel." He has some pastoral gifts, or course, but he's not called to be all things to all people. He's the recruiter, but there are others who take over for the long haul. Now, we don't always appreciate this kind of division of gifts. In my work on the COM I've had the occasion to visit with churches as they start their search for a pastor. And one of the things we always encourage churches to do, is to undertake a mission study of some kind. You need to figure out what are the needs of this church at this time, and therefore, what skills you want your

new pastor to possess. Do you want someone who has special skills as a preacher; or home visitation; or pastoral counseling; or stewardship, or youth? And the churches tell me: "We want ALL those things!" It's not easy for us to realize that no one person possesses ALL the gifts for ministry in equal portions. "There are different gifts," Paul tells us later in this letter, "but the same Spirit who gives them, and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord." It's right there in the Bible, but most churches (and most ministers) don't get it! One of the hardest things I've had to learn as a pastor is that there are some things I am NOT called to do! There are some things that I'm not good at; and the church is better off if I let someone else, who has that gift, do what God has called THEM to do! Paul understood that he could not do it alone – he needed other Christians. He understood, that he even needed those people who disagreed with his own position.

Now, I have to admit that he begins this section of his letter with a rather idealistic statement. He says: **I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose.** I think he knows better, even as he writes this. He knows that there's never a time when any church is going to be totally in agreement, with no divisions and unity of mind. And yet, he also understands that there's a hope – a possibility for greater harmony. Perhaps will not agree on *every* question, but can they not still find a way to embrace each other as sisters and brothers? I think that's what my father did as he walked through the troubled waters of my home church. There were times, I'm sure, when he didn't agree with either side, but he stood in the middle and helped them listen to each other, and he helped build bridges of understanding between the sides. And that's what Paul is doing in this letter. He reminds the Corinthians of their calling to sainthood. He reminds them of their gifts. He reminds them of his own gifts and his own limitations, and in that reminder he helps them understand that their own gifts compliment his. They are ALL needed; and when they work together the body functions as it should.

I think his reminder is one we all need to hear today, in Transylvania Presbytery and in each of our churches. We NEED each other. As we say in our mission statement: "The mission of the Transylvania Presbytery is to be a family of churches wherein all congregations are helping each congregation be the best Presbyterian Church it can be, by calling people to faith and service in the name of Jesus Christ." I am ready to take on that task, within the limits of my own gifts, and I pray that God will bring us together in such a way that all our gifts mesh and compliment each other.

One of my favorite stories is about a deacon who was asked to pray one day at a church service. It seems one of the members had suffered a stroke, and was having a hard time getting one side of his body to work. The church was praying for this man's healing, and the old deacon prayed: "An' Lord we pray for Homer, that you prop him up on the leanin' side." To be successful in this new call, I need your help and your prayers. I need you to help prop me up on my "leanin' side." And what's true for me, is true for each of us, and for all of us together. We need *all the various strengths* of each of our churches to make our common ministry succeed, because we ALL have a leanin' side. May God bless us in our work together.