

**Davidson College Presbyterian Church**  
**Rev. Shelli Latham**  
**Matthew 28:16-20; 1 Peter 2:4-9**  
**“Jesus, What were You Thinking?”**  
**July 18, 2010**

I'm going to let you in on a little secret, sometimes I just don't want to tell people I'm a pastor. Sometimes it's just easier. And I would bet that other pastors you know might tell you the same thing, if they're being honest. Sometimes I just want to sit in my airplane seat and talk about what I'm reading or what my fellow passenger is reading or just take a nap. Sometimes I want to navigate a party without delving into the hows of spiritual but not religious living, without maneuvering the treacherous waters of ways the church has been a failure, without watching the filter slide into place as people try not to offend the preacher - just on the offhand chance that it might tick off God.

But there are other times when letting a stranger in on my vocation is a fairly comical though predictable adventure. There are the people who push their cocktails just out of reach and the ones you can watch mentally backtracking to count the swear words they might have let slip. But my favorite is when people just wrinkle their eyebrows into a question mark and ask right out loud, "Seriously?" What follows is a series of questions about whether or not I can date, get married or if I live with other nuns, and the inevitable, "You don't look like a pastor." That's the best and the point which I get twinkly eyed. "What do you mean, I don't look like a pastor . . . that I'm tall?" I ask. I know what they mean. They mean that I don't look like a buttoned down 60 year-old white man. But what fun would life be without a little squirming?

Do you think the disciples did that when Jesus issued the great commission? Do you think they squirmed and second guessed themselves and one another? "Alright, friends," Jesus says, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to obey everything that I have commanded you." (Matthew 16:19-20)

"Um, us?" James asks. "But, John can't even remember to pack matching sandals. Have you heard Thomas tell a story, it takes him 10 minutes to get to the point, and he always leaves out the best part? And Peter smells like fish."

"Yeah, Jesus. We don't look like ministers. Maybe you should get someone else."

What was Jesus thinking, leaving the future of the faith in the hands of such a bunch of misfits?

But Peter goes even further in extending Christ's charge. In our second reading, Peter's commission isn't directed to just a handful of followers but to an entire people. 1 Peter is written to a persecuted and marginalized population of Christians, a group oppressed by the Romans for pointing to another kingdom as authority and home. These are the underdogs, but still Peter calls them, all of them, into a priesthood of believers. He calls all of them to allow themselves to be built up together into a spiritual house, to be pastors, preachers, ministers, teachers. He calls them to be the church.

"What are you thinking, Peter?" I imagine them saying. "We have no power. We're really not that holy. Shouldn't we have some kind of meeting to get a subcommittee together to find someone who's been to school for this kind of thing?" Peter seems to anticipate their hesitation. Maybe he remembers what it felt like to stand on a mountain with the whole world at his feet like one lone star shining light into in a blank night sky - humbled, unqualified, futile and sick to his stomach.

"Let yourselves be built up," he says. "You don't have to build it, just be it. Be the church . . . the church pieced together by the loving hands of its maker, supported by the rock of rocks, the king of kings, the one who told me I could do this so that I can tell you. Let yourselves be built up into ten thousand sparkling stars flung against the night like God's holy people called out of the darkness into God's marvelous light."<sup>1</sup> That Peter, he could give a pep talk. His words make me feel like I am part of something, like I'm necessary, like church - the world-changing, Christ-proclaiming, we're-all-in-this-together kind of Church is possible.

Peter wrote his letter to a church wrestling with the unknown, to a church trying to figure out its identity when times were tough, to a church that was trying to be brave, to grow, to nurture, to thrive in the face of obstacles and danger. I'm not going to compare the life of DCPC to the trials that the early Christians faced. We are not a congregation who worries about compromising our safety for our faith. But this is a church that is wrestling with the unknown, a church trying to figure out its identity, a church trying to be brave, to grow, to nurture, to thrive in the face of obstacles.

This is a church that has faced a lot of changes in the last several years. But we've had a lot of celebrations too. And these moments of joy and challenge have shaped us and strengthened us and forced us to be vulnerable, to be a community, to rely on one another. It would be ridiculous to stand up here and ignore the elephant in the room, to pretend I'm preaching the first farewell sermon most of you've ever heard that we haven't had so many of these going away thing-a-ma-bobs that we could make punch and unfold table cloths in our sleep. This is a church which has experienced a lot of transition and looks down a road to the future tucked just out of sight.

And I could nod in agreement that "Yes, the pastoral staff is looking a little sparse." And I could feel pretty good about me and pretty important or I could get over myself and tell you the truth: that is bunk. According to Peter, we are a holy priesthood. We are a royal priesthood - not just those who have gone to seminary, not just those who own a clerical robe and a multi-liturgically colored collection of stoles. All of us. We are the priesthood of all believers. Each of us has a calling within Christ's beautiful church, a special gift welling up within us to be lived out in service and gratitude. Every one of us is a minister. DCPC has lost a handful of pastors - the ones who have business cards and church stationary, but 1400 ministers remain. A few sassy ministers of word and sacrament are just a drop in the bucket of the spirit-driven talent of this congregation.

One of the fantastic things about being Presbyterian is that there is no hierarchy in the ministry. Deacons and Elders aren't more important than their fellow worshippers in the pews. Members of the clergy aren't more valuable or more called than the members of the session. We are all called, just to different ministries. I'm a minister of word and sacrament, though I'm more partial to the title Pastor of the Energetic, Inspiring, Big Loving, Enthusiastically Dancing, Mess Makers. Rick Cardenas, who runs the sound in the sanctuary each week and generously shares his equipment and time for special events in

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from 1 Peter 2: 4-9

the church, calls himself the Minister of Sound. What's your ministry? Jean Jackson and the Wednesday morning prayer group could be the Ministers of Prayer. What is your ministry? Bob Miller, Van Beck, David Holthouser and Jean Johnston, whose numbers are on speed dial when the building floods . . . again . . . or the bus needs new tires . . . or the Congregation House smells funny could be the Ministers of Property or the Ministers of Shared Space. What is your ministry? Are you a Minister of Nursery? Minister of Community Outreach? Minister of Big Ideas? Are you the Minister of Tasty Group Meals? The Minister of Presbyterian Women? Minister of Morale?

When I was in seminary, I had to wear a clerical collar for a week. The purpose of the assignment was to get comfortable with my pastoral identity. Well, I wasn't comfortable with it. I felt awkward strolling the aisles of the grocery store announcing my vocation with my wardrobe. I felt obvious and phony, though I did manage to make that sucker look fashionable. I felt unworthy to be marked as one with a life laid out for serving God. I still feel that way from time to time - grateful and humbled to be called to my particular line of ministry but wanting to fly under the radar too as if somebody someday will catch on to the cosmic craziness that God has called someone like me to the ministry.

On this last day of my time at DCPC, I'd like to hand out clerical collars to all of you - to give each of you the opportunity to look yourself in the mirror and see in your own eyes the terrifying and exhilarating truth that you are called. This church has faced a lot of change and has more ahead in the coming months. It's lost a handful of ministers in a short time, but 1400 talented, smart, compassionate, thoughtful ministers remain. What's your ministry?

Last week, I lived in a corrugated plastic hut in a tiny tent village of other blue "pods" in the sticky, sweltering heat of Houma, Louisiana. It was kind of like living in a 3 person greenhouse only with larger bugs and less comfortable cots. I was with the youth, doing home repairs for people impacted by a variety of hurricanes and life circumstances. One night, a few of them said, "So your sermon is going to be about our trip, right?" I said, "No, it's going to be about the church." "But it's going to be about us right?" They even wrote a sermon for me, a really good one actually, in the bus on our way home. If you ever hear me lead into a sermon saying, "Hi my name is Ms. Latham and I am the pastor giving you this sermon today," you'll know I've sampled their reflection.

"Your sermon's going to be about us, right?"

"No, it's going to be about the church and about ministry."

Except they were right. This past week, I was reminded why I love the church so much, why I have so much hope in it. We looked like 25 really dirty, ill equipped, minimally trained, underage home-repair enthusiasts. We looked more qualified to bring the disaster with us than to assist in its cleanup. That's what we looked like, but we were the church - ministers of paint and construction, a grungy priesthood of too- belt clad, hope-filled, believers. Jesus, what were you thinking, unleashing us into the world to be your hands and feet?

One of our teams built 2 sets of stairs and a porch on the home of a family with a disabled mother. As I watched the boards turn into deck railings and stairs spring up where rickety cinderblocks once stood, I was reminded of the church. That porch didn't build itself, it was lovingly crafted out of

nails and the smell of sawdust from boards that started in a useless pile, just like we are living stones lovingly pieced together by a much more qualified builder - each of us serving a specific purpose until out of seemingly nothingness God has built a church.

Our second team painted and painted and painted some more - working on a washed out community center that will one day host disaster relief groups just like ours and spiffing-up Mary's house with a fresh layer of weather resistant peach and white. As pockets of people in our youth group mixed like paint swirled with a stirrer until a beautiful shade of unity and common-purpose emerged, I saw the church - born of laughter and mess and repaired mistakes and lots and lots of singing off key and dancing when the mood strikes. I saw the church - born of sweat and resilience and shared meals in the shade of God's good grace, a collaborative of enthusiasm, disaster, and sheer will power.

Jesus, what were you thinking trusting your church, your world to such marginally equipped snack-focused, distractible individuals? I think Jesus, I think God was thinking that we are more powerful than we know, that we are more capable than we give ourselves credit for. I believe that God was thinking that a rag tag bunch of skeptical but willing servants can build something together - that it may not be perfect but it will be strong, and it will be beautiful.

Maybe like me, you're reluctant to profess your ministry at wedding receptions, board meetings, or your flight from Charlotte to who knows where. Maybe you know it would be easier to just fly under the radar, but God did not call us to be an undercover church or undercover ministers. Peter reminds our ancestors of this, and his words hold true for us. We are a priesthood of believers. You are a priesthood of believers built by God one awkward, hesitant living stone at a time - built into a spiritual house, a church, *this* church. The next time somebody asks you what you do make them squirm, make them wonder, challenge the ministerial stereotype. Say: I'm a student, I'm a banker, I'm a cabinet maker. I'm a mother, I'm a teacher, I'm the local inn keeper. But *really, really* I'm a minister. And maybe they'll wrinkle and furrow and ask, "Seriously? You don't look like a minister." But you know the secret - that God has called together an unexpected people, that God has built God's church from a motley, unlikely cast of characters - that the church may not be perfect, but it is strong and it is beautiful, and it is you.