

Today we are ordaining two new elders in this congregation so it would be appropriate to ask what congregational leadership ought to look like. When I was in West Virginia, I had to serve as Interim Moderator for a three church charge that at the time was not seeking a minister. One of the churches had a three member Session. Though they have mandated term eldership in the PCUSA, this particular congregation with its attendance of 8-12 was small enough to be exempt. The three elders were very fine caring people, pillars of the community but something just wasn't right. Session meetings never lasted more than forty-five minutes and all that was discussed was how to do this quarter the same things they had done for decades. They had worship led by one of the local lay preachers from another denomination. They had a twenty minute Bible lesson from a book which they called Sunday School. And once a year they had a great big sale that provided them with about sixty percent of their operating budget. Something was wrong with that picture and I think it had to do with leadership being unable to discern God's mission for their congregation. The Scripture readings for this morning give us a different picture of leadership.

First, let's look at Isaiah and the vision he had in which the LORD called him to be a prophet to his people. It would not be an easy message that the LORD was sending Isaiah to proclaim. It was, "Go, and tell this people: 'Keep on listening, but do not perceive; keep on looking, but do not understand.' 'Render the hearts of this people insensitive, Their ears dull, And their eyes dim, Otherwise they might see with their eyes, Hear with their ears, Understand with their hearts, And return and be healed" (Is. 6:9-10). Isaiah then asked the LORD how long he was to proclaim this and the LORD's answer was until the cities lay utterly destroyed. The call experience for Isaiah cut deeply into his own heart and the darkness of it, but after an act of God Isaiah is transformed him to want to serve the LORD and deliver that awful message.

Isaiah experienced himself in the presence of the LORD was on a throne surrounded by angels. Suddenly he became profoundly aware of his uncleanness – his shame and guilt that was the consequence of not only his own sin but also the sin of his people and he thought he was about to die. Then the angel came with the burning coal to touch his unclean lips, an image of being anointed and cleansed by the Holy Spirit, and pronounces Isaiah's guilt taken away and his sins atoned for, the Word which would come to fruition with Jesus crucified and resurrected was then applied to Isaiah in the past. So, instead of fearing for his life because of his uncleanness he became eager to serve the LORD even before he knew what the Lord wanted him to do.

When we look for such qualities in church leaders, particularly those who are to proclaim the Word to the church, on the one hand, we look for someone who knows the transformative power of the love of God enacted in and as Jesus Christ through his atoning death and resurrection and poured into us by and as the Holy Spirit so that we are made clean. And, we look for someone who desires to serve the LORD no matter how what.

Moving on to the Gospel of John, the Ruling Elder Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night in fear of being discovered. He displays his obvious ignorance of who Jesus is and what the Kingdom of God is about. Speaking on Nicodemus'

behalf, the one thing going for him is that he wanted to know who Jesus is. But, like many elders, in not only Presbyterian churches, his ignorance of who Jesus is and what the kingdom of God is about is crippling to his ability to lead and teach the people of God. Yet, as I said he has come to sit with Jesus and be taught and what Jesus has to teach him is that he needs God to do to him what God did to the prophet Isaiah and this is precisely what Jesus came to bring to fruition for all of humanity. Jesus came to rightly direct human faith in God and to destroy the sin and death that so hindered us. Through his life, death, and resurrection Jesus revealed the self-giving love that God is.

As far as church leaders, elders need to be the type of people who realize their ignorance of who Jesus is and what his kingdom is and yet still come to him to learn. Elders are people who gather around the Scriptures. The church cannot be lead by elders who simply have a Sunday School faith based on the Golden Rule rather than conversion. When that is the case, churches wind up being just a collection of good people going nowhere rather than discerning where the Spirit is leading them.

In Romans 8 Paul says we must no longer be lead by the flesh but by the Spirit. So, what is it to be led by the Spirit? Firstly, the leadership of a church must want the congregation and the community to know the transforming love of God and be changed by it. So we must pray for transformation and expect it to happen in our midst. It is the Lord's work to make this change happen.

Secondly, as transforming grace made Isaiah deeply desire to serve the LORD, so it does with us. Therefore, church leadership must wait for the LORD to say what he wants. Isaiah could have just said, “I'm unclean and about to be ruined” and then snapped out of the vision to go about telling his people they were unclean and about to be utterly destroyed. But, had experienced God's transforming grace and said to the LORD's people that this requires prayerful time in worship, time sitting in the presence of God open to the experience of God's grace. So,...mission, God directed mission, arises out of this.

Thirdly, like the Apostles in the early church, church leaders must gather together around the Scriptures, pouring over them so that, like Nicodemus, they want to learn more and more who Jesus is and what his Kingdom is about. This also involves learning theology, which is the collection of who the Church over the centuries has come to know Jesus to be and what his Kingdom is about. This is why it is very important for church leadership to continually ponder what it means for us for God to not just be God but to be Trinity, the loving communion of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Today, through your own voice the LORD has called forth two new elders to lead and pastor you through transforming grace and mission. I am quite comfortable that the two who will stand before you today are people who have experienced this transformative grace and deeply desire to serve you and are eager to know Jesus and his kingdom more and more. God is moving us forward and is calling forth leaders fit for this task. Amen.