

IF GOD IS FOR US

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If God is for us, who is against us? (Romans 8:31)

Today, for the fourth time in two years, we have the privilege of minting a new pastor to the ministry of the Word and Sacrament. Louise Rogers and Tammy Yeager were ordained here, Mandi Richey was ordained in her home church to be installed here as our second associate pastor, and today Graham Ford, a son of this congregation, is being ordained to serve his residency in the Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church. It speaks well for Westminster that so many people in such a short time have felt the call to ministry in and through this place.

In the Presbyterian Church, ministers of the Word and Sacrament are not called to a higher office than any other Christian, just a different office. We ordain elders and deacons too, because we view all kinds of ministry as important. And if you stretch the concept of ministry just a bit, our understanding is that every Christian is called to serve God in one way or another, and in that sense every Christian ought to be some kind of minister. “Ministry” means “service,” after all, and everyone who claims to follow Jesus is called to some kind of service.

Now when preachers talk like that, some people get nervous. Most people who show up in church did not sign up to be ministers – at least not at the outset. Most of us come to get something out of church, not put something in. In fact, one of the most common reasons people give for leaving a church is, “I didn’t get anything out of it.”

We are consumers of religion before we become producers, and many of us never go beyond being consumers. None of this is new, of course. The church has always been more full of consumers than producers. Read the New Testament and see what draws people to Jesus. It isn’t that they come running to find him and say, “Lord, I want to give up my comfortable life, and follow wherever you lead, and do whatever you say, no matter what it costs!” Nobody says that. People in the New Testament say things like, “Jesus, I have this friend who can’t walk; can you fix his leg?” Or, “Lord, my little daughter is sick; can you touch her and heal her?” Or even, “Jesus, tell my brother to stop hogging our inheritance and give me my fair share!”

People always want something from Jesus – healing or hope, or comfort, or forgiveness – and often when they get what they want, they go away.

Even when the disciples do drop everything to follow Jesus, they do it because he calls them, not because they’re eager to enlist. The first disciples were draftees, not volunteers. Eventually, of course, many whom Jesus drafted decide to stay. “Lord, where else can we go?” they ask. “You have the words of eternal life!” And some of those Jesus heals or does other favors for stick with him, even when it costs more than it would have cost to stay home. After a while, being with Jesus feels more important than anything else, and you just want to follow him.

Still, for most people, discipleship is an acquired taste. So it’s a struggle for us to acknowledge that Jesus calls, not just to answer our prayers, like some Honey Do list for God, but because he really wants partners to help with his work of redeeming the world. “The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few,” he says, rather wistfully. Jesus meets us where we are, but then he wants us to follow him. He starts with whatever is on our hearts, but he wants us to care about what’s on his heart too – which is God and all the people around us. “While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us,” Paul says, and that’s why grace is amazing; but Jesus says he’d rather call us friends and see us do the things he does.

There are lots of reasons why we hesitate to follow Jesus, let alone work for him. Most obviously, there's the cost. Jesus says nobody sets out to build a house without first counting the cost, and you shouldn't follow him without counting the cost either. In fact, he says, "If any want to be my disciples, let them take up their cross and follow me." That's an odd sort of recruiting appeal. No wonder people don't rush to sign up.

What's strange is that anyone should think that following Jesus means being exempt from hardship or suffering in this life. Jesus himself winds up on a cross, and Peter, Paul, and many of the rest of his followers get beaten, thrown in jail, and put to death precisely because of their devotion to Jesus. Where did we get the idea that being a Christian should spare us from even the hardest challenges of life?

But if Jesus doesn't spare us from hardships, he does give us what we need to live graciously and fully, no matter what happens. Paul knew that when he wrote those powerful words to the Romans:

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

People who have suffered earn the right to speak to suffering. Paul doesn't offer some glib pep talk from the comfort of his living room. He writes with the scars of the lash still fresh on his back, peering out through the bars of his prison cell. No matter what, he says, nothing can separate us from the love of God. He knows, because he has suffered more than most, and he's suffered not in spite of his faith, but because of it.

Most of us don't suffer much at all on account of our faith. For many of us, being a Christian hardly makes a dent in our lifestyle. Yet we fear that the cost of discipleship might be too much, and so we hesitate to follow Jesus any further than to church on Sunday morning.

But counting the cost is only one reason people hold back from following Jesus. Some people would be willing to do a whole lot more, but they don't think they have much to offer. They imagine that the saints are a different species somehow: more talented, more gifted, more spiritual. So a kind of humility holds many people back from any form of ministry.

But that's a mistake too. God doesn't call the equipped, God equips the called, as the saying goes. Jesus doesn't draft us because of our demonstrated skills. No, he says, "Follow me, and you'll be amazed at the things you will do." People hold back from serving Jesus because they have no idea how good he is at on-the-job training.

In fact, a healthy sense of incompetence is a prerequisite for ministry. Imagine someone who said, "Why, of course, you've chosen me, Jesus. Clearly you've recognized my superior wisdom, virtue, and spiritual depth. What took you so long to ask?"

If you read the Bible, a certain cluelessness seems to characterize the people God calls, at least in the beginning. In our staff Bible study on Tuesday we were reading the story of the Transfiguration and wondering what Elijah and Moses might have said to Jesus on that mountain. Here's Peter running around jabbering, "Good thing we're here, Lord. We'll get started right away making some booths for you and Moses and Elijah!" as if that made any sense. Mark comments dryly, "He did not know what to say, for they were terrified." We imagined Moses, who had problems with his own management team, saying something like, "So, Jesus, this Peter is the rock on which you're planning to build your church? That's the best you could do? Good luck with that!"

The Gospel writers are always telling their stories in a way that makes them look like a sorry lot. They don't say, "We got it right from the beginning. We knew what Jesus meant, and he was proud of us because we

were so sharp!" No, they say things like, "There he was with Moses and Elijah, and all I could think of was to build some booths!" Or, "He wanted us to stay awake with him that last night in Gethsemane, but we were all so tired. Imagine: we fell asleep when he needed us most!" Or, "He kept talking about going away and coming again, and we had no clue what he meant, until that Sunday morning, and even then we could hardly believe what we saw with our own eyes."

That's the way the brightest and best of Jesus' disciples tell their own story. And that's good news for us. It means we don't have to be better than we are in order to follow Jesus, or to work for him as his ministers. The people we read about in the Bible didn't get it either – but look what he did with them, and through them, and for them. Out of that goofy gang Jesus built a church that changed the lives of millions throughout history, and today comprises two and half billion people all around the world. For all its imperfections, the church has carried the good news of Jesus Christ to every land through every time, and has lifted up for all humanity the way to live, even when we're not very good at it ourselves. The Holy Spirit has done all that with people no different than you and me.

So Paul's message sustains us, whether we're going through hard times ourselves, or we're afraid of the cost of discipleship, or we don't think we have the right stuff to be his servants:

If God is for us, who can be against us?

If God is for us, won't God give us what we need to do what God wants in this world?

If God is for us, and Christ died for us while we were still sinners, won't God free us from guilt, and give us grace to forgive one another and ourselves?

If God is for us, won't God give us brave hearts and strong spirits, so that whatever the cost of discipleship we will pay it gladly, because Jesus has the words of eternal life?

If God is for us, won't God heal us, if not in this life then in the life to come, and fill us with joy, and make us into a new creation?

If God is for us, who or what can be against us? No one or nothing that matters – because in the end, as at the beginning and throughout our lives, God is with us.