

## **Pastor Kerry Nelson – Five-day devotion series on calling a pastor – May 2007**

Good morning. Welcome to Monday, May 21st.

“The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.” Ephesians 4: 11-13

Two things happened this past week that put “pastors and people” on my mind. The first was an email suggesting that I write a week of devotions for congregations seeking new pastors. The second was a farewell celebration in my previous parish as their pastor (and my friend. Mentor, and former senior pastor) has decided to move on after 22 years of ministry. (Maybe I should just share their emails with one another and be done with it.) These two events bring the relationship of pastor and people to my mind.

Each different Christian denomination understands the relationship between pastor and people with slightly different twists. Some draw a distinction between the two whereby the pastor is bequeathed, by virtue of his (always his) ordination with spiritual powers not available to the people in the pews. Others rely on a certain charismatic skill set that may or may not be attested to by a certificate of ordination.

Lutherans tend to think of the relationship primarily in functional terms. People with gifts and a passion for ministry are sent to college and seminary to receive an education, and then made available to the whole church to do the work of ordained ministry. Once they are called by a congregation to serve among them as pastor, they are ordained to do that work. Pastors function as preachers, teachers, worship leaders, counselors and whatever else comes their way between Sunday and Saturday. They become “player coaches” within Christian community. And the people support them, give and receive ministry. Together, they function as the church.

While institutional machinery, church politics, comes into play in every branch of Christianity, what ultimately links “pastor and people” is relationship. However we look at it, and however we get there, there is a holy relationship between God’s people and the clay pots that stand in front of the sanctuary every Sunday morning.

How do we characterize that relationship? Is it a corporate business model – a “hired gun” – who works under the thumb of the church board? Is it a spiritual guru model where the pastor becomes THE representative of God in the community? I am going to argue this week that it is instead a relationship much closer to the relationship of marriage – and that what really matters isn’t power, position or prestige. What really matters is purpose. God’s purpose.

And God’s purpose is clear here in Ephesians. God gifts, calls, trains, and sends pastors into Christian community to “equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.” It is God’s idea that some function as pastors, not for the sake of the church but for the sake of the world. We’ll spend this week looking more closely at the holy match-making that goes on in the church.

Let us pray: Gracious Lord, in every age you raise up leaders who proclaim your Word and shepherd your people. We pray, as members together within your body, for wisdom, willingness and whatever it takes to function well both as pastors and as people within your kingdom. We seek your encouragement, guidance and direction as you use us as you will in our daily lives and daily work. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Good morning. Welcome to Tuesday, May 22nd.

“Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.' Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.” Luke 14:27-33

Everyone knows it is very difficult to enter into any kind of mutual relationship if you don't have a good idea about who you are. Jerry Maguire aside, seeking to “complete yourself” in another person is a recipe for disaster. So it is in the relationship between a pastor and the people.

When Jesus talks to the crowds about discipleship, he uses examples of one person preparing to build a tower and another preparing to fight a battle. In both cases, taking a personal inventory, discovering who you are and what you “bring to the table” is a necessary step in preparations.

I am a pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. For the rest of the week I am going to write from the perspective of the ELCA. It is what I know best...OK, it is pretty much all I really know. So you will have to translate if you live in a different tradition. Here in the ELCA, when a congregation begins the process of calling a pastor they go through a period of self assessment and evaluation, normally with the help and guidance of the bishop's office.

Everybody begins the call process assuming that the perfect next pastor will be the world's greatest preacher to pack the pews on Sunday, the world's greatest evangelist to finally attract new people, the world's greatest youth minister to “keep the kids in church” and the world's greatest chaplain to engage in meaningful ministry with seniors. Two problems with that idea. First, he or she doesn't exist. And second, church life is a lot more complicated than that. Taking a personal inventory will help a congregation see that.

Often congregations blow through that stage without doing much more work than filling out blanks on a form. That isn't taking inventory, it is going through the motions. Truly taking inventory means gathering trusted leaders from the congregation and taking a good hard look at where you have been, and how it is that you have gotten to where you are. It means looking at the dynamics of the congregation and the context in which ministry has been happening. Numbers and trends are easy...discerning what lies behind them is hard.

Congregations also need to take inventory of their dreams. Key leaders need to look inside and take stock of whether their input into the process is self serving or truly in the best interests of the future of the congregation. What is the language of their mission statement? When is the last time they did a long range plan? How much “buy in” is there among the membership for the plan? Are their future hopes about survival of the institution or about making the world a better place?

When it finally comes down to the match with the right pastor, it isn't about the compensation package (corporate model) or winning one another with pizzazz (charismatic model), but about both parties truly understanding themselves well enough to discern that they will work well together to do what God wants to see done.

Let us pray: Gracious Lord, we pray today for congregations seeking pastors and pastors seeking new calls. We ask your blessings upon church councils, call committees and those working in the office of bishop. We ask for eyes willing to see reality and hearts open to guidance and direction. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Good morning. Welcome to Wednesday, May 23rd.

When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, "Surely the Lord's anointed is now before the LORD." But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart." 1 Samuel 16: 6-7

What's God got to do with it?

Jesse had seven sons, any of whom could have been king material but none of whom were the ones God wanted. Only David, the youngest, was left to be paraded before Samuel. David was the one God wanted.

So it is for a congregation seeking a pastor or a pastor seeking a new call – we might have all sorts of ideas but we would do well to begin with the question, "What's God got to do with it?"

Far too often, that is the last thing on our mind. Whether it is a pastor seeking a call or a call committee looking for their next pastor, far too often we hardly give a second thought to what God might have to say. We might start a call committee meeting with a quick prayer to maintain appearances...but do we really believe that God is preparing just the right person to fill that role among us? A pastor might be seeking greener pastures or a "new call induced raise", but is she or he really concerned about what God might be doing in their lives?

What's God got to do with it? How are we going to find that out? We ask!!

If ever there is a time in a congregation when the whole crew needs to be called to prayer it is during that time of waiting during a pastoral transition. Every family needs a prayer card on their kitchen table reminding them to be praying about and for their next pastor. Every congregational gathering, every Sunday School class, every worship service needs to include petitions that God might send just the right person to them and that God might bless their call committee with discernment as they work the process.

Every pastor needs to see God at work behind and in the midst of the call process. It isn't about applying and interviewing for a job, and it isn't a beauty contest – it is a time to cooperate with God, to rely on the counsel of trusted friends, to listen closely to their own "insides" and be open to surprises.

Steeping the call process in prayer on both sides prepares for the beginning of a new relationship that is dedicated to God's purposes and trusts God's provision.

I was blessed in moving from my first parish to Covenant in that I only moved 25 miles west. I was able to (often) drive out to the church, drive past the parsonage, sit for awhile in the parking lot, all the while asking if this was the place God wanted me to be. Nine months before I was even asked to interview at Covenant, I had a talk with our bishop's assistant and described the kind of place that I felt called to serve in. Without realizing it, I was describing Covenant. My whole time here I have felt like this is the place God created me to serve. There is incredible freedom and grace found in such a match.

Prayer is more than asking for stuff, it also helps us see ourselves more clearly. It puts us in a position of humility before God. It helps us recognize that we are little more than clay being shaped in God's hands...but holy clay made holy by the very touch of those hands. So it is that prayer for just the right person, and just the right people, and just the right place, is always where we start, live and end.

Let us pray: Dear Lord, far too often we turn to you last rather than first. We come to you to clean up our mistakes more often than seeking your direction to our steps. Keep us open and alert to your guidance. Fill our imaginations and guide our wills, that we might follow only where you lead the way. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Good morning. Welcome to Thursday, May 24<sup>th</sup>.

I waited patiently for the LORD; he inclined to me and heard my cry. He drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure. He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the LORD. Psalm 40:1-3

When I was on internship in Cheyenne, Wyoming, my supervisor and I were part of a small ecumenical pastor's Bible study and support group. We would meet every other Wednesday. One week we gathered and the United Methodist minister wasn't there. He had been moved over the weekend. Poof. Just like that, he was gone.

The pastor who performed my first wedding had been having a difficult time in his parish. A good share of the people thought it time that he move on. It was a small town, his children were still in school, it wasn't so easy just to move. So he announced his resignation, effective eighteen or so months later!

Somewhere between those two extremes lies the experience of most congregations seeking pastors and pastors seeking to move. It can be a long, complicated and drawn out process. Thinking only about the relational ties between a pastor and a congregation is complicated enough but that is further complicated if the pastor has a family – a spouse with a good job, kids with friends and roots at school. It isn't easy to pick up and move. Transitions and changes are hard for everyone.

In our denomination, we trust the office of the bishop to help us work through the call process. Congregations expect the bishop to send them the names of qualified candidates who seem like a good match. Pastors expect the bishop to help find the right place for them to land. And the bishops, with many demands on their time, usually with very small staffs, seldom have the time to carefully cull the dozens of profiles they have on file of those choosing to move.

When I think of all of the pieces of the puzzle and how emotionally complicated and weighty all of this is, it is a wonder to me that the process works at all! But it does, over and over again, and often works out wonderfully.

Personally, I believe in the value of long pastorates. When there is a life-giving match between pastor and congregation, staying in one place opens the doors to everyone growing. Working through issues rather than running away from them, giving children a stable experience as they grow up, working toward dreams that take years to happen – none of this can happen if there are pastoral transitions every few years. I came to Covenant with a clear sense that I hoped to be here at least 20 years – whether or not that happens is up to God but it has worked so far.

But when it comes time for a change, when a congregation begins seeking a pastor or a pastor becomes open to moving, everyone needs to be aware that the process is slow and arduous. Often there is disappointment as a congregation decides against a pastor who really felt called to that place, or a pastor turns down a call to a congregation after spending months working together in the process. In all of that, patience and trust in the process will be tested again and again.

The psalmist writes (in my favorite psalm) that he waited patiently for the Lord and ultimately the Lord acted. Sometimes it will take up to three years for a

congregation to get just the right pastor. Other times it can happen very very quickly, in just a matter of months. The point is to remember that there is no "right way" for everyone but only the right way for that specific match. And that right way can't be forced by the power of personalities and pull but by trusting God and doing the next right thing along the way.

Let us pray: Dear Jesus, you called your disciples, they left their nets and they followed. It seems so quick and easy in reading your stories. But that is so often not the experience that congregations and pastors face. Often it takes a long time to work through the process, to attend to all the details, to handle the disappointments and joys that comes. Give all of those facing such a process a sense of your presence and the kind of trusting patience that will see them through. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Good morning. Welcome to Friday, May 25th.

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. Ephesians 4: 1-7

All week I've been writing about what my denomination names "the call process." That is, the process whereby a pastor and a congregation come together in order to use their gifts for ministry, to further God's purposes in the world. Ultimately a decision is made. A call committee votes in favor of a particular candidate. Then the church council does the same. The person's name is brought before the congregation for a vote. If "yes", a letter of call is prepared and sent to the bishop for approval. And then it is the pastor's turn to decide. If everyone agrees, arrangements are made for moving and beginning a new stage of life.

Paul's words to the church in Ephesus about the nature of life in Christian community inform each step along the way. Humility, gentleness, patience, maintaining unity – just as these attitudes and the behaviors that flow from them "grease the wheels" of courtship, they also enable trust to be developed and maintained once the relationship has been sealed.

For most people in a congregation, there is something "other" about a pastor. Sometimes that gets overblown in childhood myths of special powers and pedestals, and often there is a real dark side to such projections put upon the broken human beings who occupy that office. But there is no denying that there is something "other" about the role, the office, which a person occupies. That "otherness" finally lands in the power of trust. A congregation needs to trust their pastor – that their teaching and preaching are based on and communicate truth, that they don't abuse the privileges of their position, that they will do the best job they can.

In the same way, a pastor needs to trust his or her congregation. Every pastor I know appreciates direct communication more than anything else. Talking TO the pastor rather than ABOUT the pastor is always the way to go. Always. Being clear about what you want and need from the pastor is always helpful, as is the recognition that there are only so many hours in a day and a pastor needs balance in his or her life like anyone else.

Mutual encouragement, the willingness to meet the other, a steadfast commitment to the purposes of the kingdom over against personal tastes and preferences, an openness and servant's heart to the wider community – these are the mutual dynamics that fuel a healthy partnership within a congregation.

Does this always happen? Maybe in our dreams. Certainly in our aspirations. But in real life, there are breakdowns and letdowns and put downs. No pastor and no congregation is perfect. But God IS perfect and patient and gentle and forgiving. And week after week, as the church comes together in worship, their community life and mutual calling is given new life and a fresh beginning. We live together in God's amazing grace!

In this life together, everyone needs to recognize that the pastor is not the only person in a congregation with a holy calling. The Lutheran doctrine of the priesthood of all believers is a reminder that God calls each and every one of us, in our baptism, to be representatives of Jesus in the world. Each one of us has been gifted for service. Each one of us bears responsibility for the health, vitality and mission of the church. The pastor's primary ministry is TO the congregation and THROUGH the congregation to the world. But for every other person, their primary ministry is TO the world, a ministry for which they are strengthened THROUGH their participation in Christian worship and community. Each of us plays a part – and through the power of the Holy Spirit, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Let us pray: Dear Jesus, we thank you for every opportunity you give us to come together with other people of faith for mutual encouragement and worship. We thank you for the people who serve in the front of the room, for those sitting in the seats and for those working behind the scenes. As we prepare to celebrate again the out-pouring of your Spirit this Pentecost Sunday, we pray that you breath fresh new life into the congregations who bear your name in the world. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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