

THE HOPE IN OUR CALLING

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Jeremiah 29:8-14; Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-16

***“There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called
to the one hope of your calling...”***

Ephesians 4:4

Once a day — except for Sunday — I go through a little ritual: usually, late in the afternoon. I walk down to the mailbox at the end of the driveway, collect whatever’s inside and take it up to my office at the church.

There I divide it: church mail on one side (that goes on the desk of Regina, our office manager); personal mail on the other.

Then I go through the personal stuff. It’s probably the same for you as it is for me: I end up with a big pile for recycling and a very small pile of important stuff to take home to the manse, to deal with there.

I can generally tell, without even opening the envelope, which pile a letter belongs in. If the envelope says “0% interest for the first six months,” then you know where it goes. The same is true of “Save on your car insurance,” or “Important survey inside.” If the envelope has a little window, through which I see a stack of return-address labels with my name on it, it’s bound for the recycling pile, too (I’ve got way more of those little freebie labels than I could ever use.)

I have to admit that, if I spy the face of Thomas Jefferson on a shiny new nickel, I do slit the envelope open, take the nickel out and put it in my pocket. My Scottish ancestry compels me to do no other. But as for the rest of it...recycling!

I wonder how Paul's letters were received, when they arrived. Were they, too, folded into envelopes? I kind of doubt it — though I couldn't say for sure. They were probably on some kind of scroll. Far more important for his readers were the words of the letter.

This section from Ephesians I just read for you introduces a new section. It contains within it a hint about where it originated: "I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord..."

That's some return address! Imagine if you got a letter in your mailbox that had, as a return address, "Inmate number 27607, Rahway State Prison." Would you be inclined to open it?

The writer of this letter seems unconcerned about his return address. He splashes his prisoner status right up front. It's almost a badge of honor. Paul, of course, is in prison on account of his faith — which makes him different from most other people who write letters from behind bars.

For the members of this church who are being ordained or installed to church office today, we're going to turn to the advice of this inmate. We'll see what he has to say to those who are taking up new responsibilities as deacons or ruling elders.

We're going to look especially hard at verse 4, which says this: "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling..."

We do believe, in the Presbyterian Church, that leadership is a calling. It's more than a job. It's more than a task you volunteer for. It's something to which God calls you.

Yes, I know those who serve as deacons or ruling elders got to be where they are because someone from the Congregational Nominating Committee asked them — and the congregation obligingly confirmed the invitation by electing them. But it's a good deal more complicated than that, isn't it? Along with the invitation to serve comes a call to discern God's will: because this is about more than just seeing your name in print on the back of the bulletin. If you said yes to that invitation, we expect you have searched your heart to determine if God is calling you to be a spiritual leader.

Well, what is this spiritual leadership thing all about? It's about a lot of things, but here in verse 4, it's about just one thing: hope. *The hope of our calling.*

There are lots of qualities I like to see in the men and women who serve as church officers, but truly one of the most important is this thing called hope. I think we need it more and more, these days, as this and every church struggles to understand how its role in American society is changing.

We used to be a favored institution. We got a lot of help and support, without ever having to ask for it. Everybody knew, in the 1950s and early 1960s, that if you listed membership in a house of worship — and especially a title of church officer — on your resume, you had a better chance of being hired. People in business looked on the church as a place for networking. The fine, upstanding citizens you met here could be potential customers, or clients, or partners in one way or another.

Nearly all parents looked on their house of worship as an indispensable ally in their work of child-rearing. They truly believed Sunday School would help them raise their kids to become adults with high moral principles. And so they came in droves. All churches had to do, in that era, was to build an education wing — and the families just poured in. If you build it, they will come. Couldn't be easier.

I don't need to tell you, today, we're living in a very different time. Christian churches are widely ignored by a large swath of the population, and actively distrusted by a great many others. We need to find new ways of bringing our message of hope in Jesus Christ to the community.

We, as a church, need our deacons and ruling elders to lead us in that work. We need them to demonstrate a quality of life that's winsome and engaging — eager to share the joy of knowing Christ, and following as his disciple.

Perhaps most of all, though, in these days of uncertainty and rapid change, we need our leaders to be people of contagious hope. We all hear the voices out there, doing their level best to shut hope down — to practice “ain't it awful”-ism and perpetuate a culture of complaint.

It's so easy to look backwards: to glorify and romanticize the past. “Remember when our sanctuary was filled every Sunday?” “Remember when there were no kids' soccer games on Sunday mornings?” “Remember when there was prayer in schools?” “Remember when the high-school chorus could sing hymns in their concerts and no one would dream of complaining?”

Most all of us — whether we personally remember those days or not — can gin up complaints like these without hardly trying. Yet, that ability to generate

complaints is not what we need today from our leaders. We need something more. We need our leaders to be people of hope.

Let me give you an example of what I mean. It's a story of something that happened a few years back, in a little Episcopal church in the small town of Randolph, New York. It's just south of Buffalo.

One day, someone noticed an anonymous person had spray-painted something on the wall of their church building. It was a question — a theological question, as a matter of fact: “Can I still get to heaven if I kill myself?”

Well, what to do? How to respond? Yes, it was vandalism, of a sort, but it was also a serious question: a cry for help from a troubled soul. But who wrote it? How could you get back to that person with an offer of help?

Do you know what the leaders of that church decided to do? After some soul-searching, they went out and bought a can of spray paint. Right next to that anguished question, they spray-painted a reply: “God loves you with no exceptions!”

Someone took a picture of both pieces of graffiti. The photo went viral on social media. It was seen — and reposted — by millions. But that wasn't why the church leaders took that can of spray paint in hand and did what they did. They

weren't thinking of the millions who might see it on the Internet. They were concerned about reaching only one set of eyes: those of the troubled soul who had spray-painted that plaintive question.

The point is: the leaders of that congregation took the question seriously. They answered it the only way they could have: in the very medium in which the question had first been raised. They answered it in Christian hope: trusting that the questioner would somehow see the church's answer, and find strength to persevere.

They gave no thought to the appearance of their lovely building. They could have just painted over the question. They could have restored the building to its pristine condition. But they didn't do it (at least not right away). They didn't do it because they were people of hope, and they knew that communicating the hope we have in Jesus Christ was the single most important thing they could be doing.¹

I'm going to ask you all, now, to take out your worship bulletins and find the place on page 3 of the worship order where we've printed out the ordination and

¹Episcopal News Service, "Western New York: Randolph Church responds to vandalism with grace," May 22, 2013. <https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/2013/05/22/western-new-york-randolph-church-responds-to-vandalism-with-grace/>

installation questions. In a little while, the people of faith you've elected as elders and deacons are going to respond to them.

We don't always print out the text of the questions in full, but I wanted to do that today so you all could read them. You can see in these words how the elected leaders of this congregation live out the hope of their calling.

I'd like to add, by the way, that these questions — except for the final one — are exactly the same ones I was asked at my ordination as a minister, and reaffirmed most recently when I was installed here as pastor. In the Presbyterian Church, all our ordained leaders are linked together by the same words of promise.

First one: **“Do you trust in Jesus Christ your Savior, acknowledge him Lord of all and Head of the Church, and through him believe in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?”**

You'll see in that first line the words “Lord” and “Savior.” When people join the church — either through the Confirmation Class or as adults — the only theological question we ask them is “Who is your Lord and Savior?” (The answer, of course, is “Jesus Christ.”) We ask our elected leaders to reaffirm that confessional statement, but then to go beyond it. We ask them to affirm their belief in the Trinity: in God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The second question asks them to go further down the road of theology: **“Do you accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be, by the Holy**

Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God’s Word to you?”

That question says two important things about the ways the Bible bears “witness to Jesus Christ.” First, the Bible is unique: there’s no other book like it. Second, it’s authoritative: we don’t come to the scriptures saying, “Maybe I’ll find something in here that’s worthwhile, and maybe I won’t.” No, we’re meant to come to the Bible expecting to find God’s word there: listening for that fresh insight, that new perspective, that gives us guidance for how to live as disciples of Jesus. That’s what the question means by “God’s Word to you.”

The scriptures are the primary authority for us in the Presbyterian Church, but we also have an important secondary source of authority, the confessions of the church: **“Do you sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our church as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do, and will you be instructed and led by those confessions as you lead the people of God?”**

Our confessions are twelve in number: beginning with the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed, continuing through six confessions from the Reformation Era — the 1500s and 1600s — then, four from the modern era. Together they comprise a hefty volume of over 300 pages.

Why so many confessions, you may be wondering? We have so many because we believe, as Reformed Christians, that the faith must be confessed anew

in every age. There's an old Latin motto that comes out of Holland: "*Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda.*" It means, "The Reformed church, always being reformed."

Do we expect our elders and deacons to become experts in all the ins and outs of these confessional statements? No, but we do expect them to know that the Book of Confessions is a valuable reference book they can use to answer their own questions, and those you may ask them. The language is, "Will you be instructed and led by those confessions?" *Instructed. Led.* We don't ask them to subscribe to every word — and in fact, some of those Reformation-era documents use language we would never use today — but that book contains the rich soil of our theological heritage, from which the church's proclamation sprouts and grows in every generation.

The next question is a kind of recap. It puts these sources of authority in proper order: **"Will you fulfill your ministry in obedience to Jesus Christ, under the authority of Scripture, and be continually guided by our confessions?"**

First, Jesus. Second, the Bible. Third, the confessions. That's the proper order. But this question says one other thing you ought to know about. It asks, "Will you fulfill your ministry...?"

Ministry, in our church, doesn't belong just to the ministers of the Word and Sacrament like myself. It's shared among all God's people — but especially the elders and deacons.

The next question — number five, if you're counting — is all about government: **“Will you be governed by our church's polity, and will you abide by its discipline? Will you be a friend among your colleagues in ministry, working with them, subject to the ordering of God's Word and Spirit?”**

I love the way this question begins with the rather dry subject of government — that's what the word “polity” means — and goes on to talk about friendship. The oath of office taken by our President and other elected officials in the civil realm says nothing about friendship. Can you imagine: “...preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States, and be a friend to your colleagues in government?” (Granted, we could use more of that in Washington these days, but it's just not part of the oath of office!) What sounds rather strange in that context, though, makes perfect sense in the church. In this community of faith, the quality of our relationships — *how* we do it, in leadership — is just as important as *what* we do.

These promises don't end within the walls of the church. Question six demonstrates that commitment to serve as an elder or deacon has ramifications for our home and work life as well:

“Will you in your own life seek to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, love your neighbors, and work for the reconciliation of the world?”

Question seven: **“Do you promise to further the peace, unity, and purity of the church?”**

That question’s deceptively short, but there’s a lot more going on there than you may think. First, the church is called to be a community of peace, where everyone strives to get along. Second, we’re called to be united: together, without divisions. Third, the church is called to be pure: a place where people do the right thing.

There’s a certain tension among those three aspects. They must be kept in perfect balance. Think of a church that valued peace above all things: such a community would deny and suppress all conflict, and never resolve it. Or, think of a church where unity was everything: in order to keep everyone happy, they would stand for nothing, jettisoning all creeds. They’d let everyone believe whatever they wanted to believe. In still other churches, purity is the thing, to the exclusion of all else. The strict moral code enforced by the leadership is never open to discussion: and anyone who doesn’t live up to its smallest detail is expelled from the fellowship. (There goes unity, right out the window.)

There's great wisdom in keeping all three of these principles — peace, unity and purity — in balance.

Now we're in the home stretch. Question eight is a favorite of a great many Presbyterian leaders: **“Will you pray for and seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love?”**

Note the instruction to pray for and serve the people. We who serve as deacons, elders or ministers of the Word and sacrament are meant to remember the people — and often — in our prayers. We're also meant to serve them. The word ministry — *diakonos*, in the Greek, which you'll notice sounds an awful lot like “deacon” — literally means “service.” Servant leadership is our ideal. It's the way of Christ.

And finally, there are those beautiful words: energy, intelligence, imagination and love. We're meant to bring all that we are to this important work.

The final ordination question — number nine — is particular to each order of ministry. The one for elders describes what elders do: watching over and equipping the people, overseeing the many services the church provides, and being active in church government. The one for deacons speaks of “teaching charity, urging concern and helping the friendless and those in need.” Two different orders of ministry, requiring two different sets of spiritual gifts.

Congregation, you have done well in electing these men and women to serve as your elders and deacons. They have the gifts of the Spirit to do what needs to be done. In a short while we will confirm — or re-affirm — that to be true, as we ordain and install them.

Most of all, they are people of hope: not people of nostalgia for the past, but people who are attuned to where the Holy Spirit is leading this congregation in the future. Truly, these are leaders we need: Christians who demonstrate the hope of their calling.

We are thankful, indeed, that they have responded to the call by saying, “Here I am, send me!”

Let us pray:

**Lord, we read in the scriptures how your Holy Spirit was constantly adding to the number of the faithful those who were being saved.
What more can your Spirit do in these days but that very same thing?
Perform that great work among us, we pray.
Remind us all — ministers, ruling elders, deacons, baptized Christians — of the hope of our calling.
May that hope not only grow in our individual hearts, but may it burst forth in this community in powerful ways.
In the name of the Christ who calls we ask it. Amen.**

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