

FOR THE LOVE OF GOD
Presented at the Ordination Service
For my son, Carl Heppner, May 6/01,
At Braeside EMC in Winnipeg

INTRODUCTION

I am deeply honored to be part of this ordination service today. I can not help but be reminded of the Spring of 1973. That was 27 years ago and I was 27 - half a life-time ago. We were on our way to Bolivia, and in preparation for that ministry I was ordained as a minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It was a time of affirmation as God's people laid trusting hands upon Ruth and me and sent us out with the blessing of God into a life of service within the context of the church and its mission.

Now, in 2001, you, Carl - just past 27 - are being ordained to the ministry as well. Do you notice a pattern at all? There is a sense of *de ja vous* here. Perhaps the only significant shifts in the pattern are that you dropped an "M" – moving from EMMC to EMC - and that you don't have a son in diapers like I did.

Since this occasion comes at a time in my own pilgrimage when I am facing some uncertainties about future ministry, I see this celebration as an opportunity to "pass the baton" as it were - from one generation to another - from father to son - from elder brother to younger brother - from one pilgrim to another.

I have already enjoyed the opportunity to compare notes - and visions, and hopes, and dreams, and strategies, and questions, and struggles with you as you have begun your public ministry in the Kingdom. But I relish this opportunity to pass on to you in this public forum some of the lessons I have learned and keep learning along the way. And I look forward to much mutual learning in the years to come.

MY TEXT

My text for this occasion is taken from **John 21: 15-22**

When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my lambs." Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me?" He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep." The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things, you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Feed my sheep. I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch

out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.” Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, “Follow me.”

Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them. (This was the one who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper and had said, “Lord, who is going to betray you?” When Peter saw him, he asked, “Lord, what about him?”

Jesus answered, “If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me.”

I find this text both relevant and powerful. In a sense it is Peter's ordination service. But it is more than a word of congratulation and a nod in which Jesus wishes Peter well in the career he has chosen for himself. It cuts through the layers of pleasantries, formalities, pretense and temptations of self-service in which we like to wallow. It stands as a manifesto — a ministerial confession — a charge to all those entering Kingdom ministry; as well as to those of us who already have been on the way for a longer time.

THE CONTEXT FOR THE CONVERSATION

Notice that Jesus initiates the conversation involved in this “ordination service”. He has come to the disciples, not when they were filled with confidence, not when they were slapping each other on the back in congratulations and anticipation of what they would all accomplish. But when they were thinking of throwing in the towel. They had gone back to fishing, uncertain about their futures. So I suggest that Jesus still takes initiative in calling forth and sending out workers into Kingdom ministry.

Carl, Jesus meets you today, not because you have impressed him with your academic abilities, your personal holiness, your faithfulness, or your good intentions. He knows about your failures, your doubts, your betrayals — as he did those of Peter. But he comes to meet you and bless you anyway. He has a work for you to do. He has laid his eyes on you and refuses to take them off.

How well I remember when you invited mom and me for supper and you told us how you sensed God's call to ministry. In some senses you were out fishing as well — in waters that kept yielding empty nets. But in your own way, you said you had seen Jesus on the shore telling you to cast your nets on the other side of the boat. You heard him inviting you to breakfast. What does one do when Jesus lays his hands on you? It is indeed a cause for celebration and joy that the body of believers here at Braeside EMC have also heard that call and are today confirming it in this act of ordination.

Notice also that Jesus "ordains" Peter after breakfast. Jesus is kind. He hosts a fish barbeque on the shore for hungry and discouraged fishermen who really wanted to be his disciples. In this act he is saying, " I care about your needs. And I will provide!" It's not

like he is saying that Peter had been so hard at work in the Kingdom that he deserved a breakfast out. Nor does he confront Peter and lay a guilt trip on him. The call comes in the context of tremendous caring.

I would suggest, Carl, that Jesus has already demonstrated to you that he cares for you, and that he will provide. He has gifted you. He has carried you through some rough waters. He has given you a lovely and supportive spouse who shares with you a love for God and an enthusiasm for ministry. You have tasted Jesus' "barbequed fish" and found them satisfying.

MOTIVATION FOR SERVICE IS THE LOVE FOR GOD

"Do you love me?" Jesus asks Peter. How scared we are of such a personal question, says Henri Nouwen. Can't we just feed the sheep? No! When the sheep get ugly, and they will, we'll quit if we are doing it for any other reason than our love for Jesus.

We would prefer questions like, "How many hours have you put in for the Kingdom this week?" "How many sermons did you preach this month?" "How many people did you talk to?" With such questions we could stand tall and proud and remind Jesus how valuable we are; how he would not get along very well without us.

But Jesus keeps coming back to the basics. **Do you love me?** Craig Barnes tells of the sermon Henry Nouwen gave at his graduation from seminary. *I can still see Nouwen leaning over the pulpit asking us, "Do you love Jesus? Do you love Jesus? Do you love Jesus? He waited through a long pause." Yes. Yes. Yes, of course I do. I thought, That is why I am here. Then he made this promise.*

If you say yes, it will mean meetings, meetings, and meetings, because the world likes meetings. It means parishioners who only want one thing of you, not to rock the boat...it means being subjected to endless déjà vu experiences. It means all of that. But it also means anxious hearts waiting to hear a word of comfort, trembling hands eager to be touched, and broken spirits with expectations to be healed...Your life is not going to be easy. It ought to be hard. It ought to be radical; it ought to be restless; it ought to lead you to places you'd rather not go.

So what is our motive for serving? Performance evaluations are relatively easy, but even those can be painful. Basically, you identify strengths and weaknesses and make necessary adjustments. But an evaluation of motives is another matter. Oh, it's quite easy to see the motives of "other" people. But when it come to our own motives we often have blind spots.

I have discovered in my own life and in the lives of my fellow pilgrims what I call the *ice-berg theory*. About 10% of our motives are obvious, the rest remain hidden below the water. At least much more lies below the surface than meets the eye. That is why the psalmist pleads with God, **Search me O God and know my heart...try me... see if there**

is any offensive way in me (Psalm 139:23-24). I have come to think that the Psalmist is not suggesting that there just might be some small twisted motive that needs tweaking. I think he is referring to powerful, hidden motives that erupt from the center of our souls — from the 90% hidden below the water. And I have also observed that often the hidden motives are noticed by others first. Sometimes they are so glaringly obvious to all but ourselves.

There are can be many hidden motives for ministry — beneath the surface — undetected. One is a desire to be in the limelight. This is an insidious self-centeredness. I am happy when I am the center of attention. I like to flaunt my busy schedule, my hard work, my exploits — to make sure people notice how valuable I am.

Another is an attempt to prove my worth. This shows up in a drivenness that doesn't allow me to say No. In over estimating my gifts and abilities. Trying to please everyone. Or a continual reinforcing of the fact that I'm okay - its others who don't understand.

A third hidden motive can be to demonstrate my superiority. I'm smart, am I not? I'm creative and energetic, right? I find it hard to really listen to others, to enter their lives and there discover our common humanity - our fractured genetic structures, our frailty, our need of grace.

A fourth hidden motive can be to hide my insecurities. I need to be right. Criticism devastates me because it touches deep inner insecurities. I am uncomfortable with silence or with chaos. I must get things back into order where I can control things.

Oh, how we need help with our motives! ***Search me O God and know my Heart!*** What Jesus is telling Peter is that in the end, it is only love for God that stands the test of time. Rest in God's love and return that love in your service. But know that you can't earn God's love. It's already poured out to the last drop. The length of service is not as important at the sincerity of one's motives.

So keep the search light on your soul. Resist the temptation to say with Peter, "What about him, Lord? Have you checked John's motives? Jesus says, "What is that to you? You must follow me."

So the first lesson to remember is to "stay connected". Pursue a spirituality rooted in Jesus. A spirituality that rests in the love of God — and loves God in return. A spirituality that recognizes that there is much to learn "along the way". A spirituality of the Road (as David Bosch said it) — that takes the presence and power of Christ with you on the road of life and ministry. A spirituality that is aware of the fracture lines that are part of who you are.

In a certain tradition, more liturgical than ours, the congregation would naturally respond responsively to the pastor's promptings. At various points in the liturgy he would say, "The Lord bless you" and the congregation would respond, "And you also." One morning he was having trouble with his mike. Thinking the sound was not coming through as he

fiddled with the mike he muttered, "This thing isn't working right." However at that moment the sound came through loud and clear. The congregation responded as usual, "And you also." You will never arrive at the point where you don't need to keep working at becoming all God wants you to be.

In his book, *Becoming Human*, Jean Vanier says, *All of us carry within ourselves brokenness, as well as shadow areas, dark corners of the spirit where uncomfortable things are hidden.* So it is important to find healing for yourself in order to offer healing to others. Vanier suggests that *The one who is healed and the one who is healing must constantly change places.*

Do you love Jesus? Do you love Jesus? Do you love Jesus?...Then feed my sheep.

FEED MY SHEEP

You see there is more to the ministry than keeping oneself spiritually fit — to keep one's motives in check. There are sheep to feed. Notice that each time Peter affirms his love for Jesus, the Lord reflects back that affirmation with a charge to "***Feed my lambs***", "***Take care of my sheep***", "***Feed my sheep.***" As Paul says, "***We have been given a ministry of reconciliation.***" So Jesus gave Peter a task to perform — sheep to feed.

The call to ministry is a call to move past a self-centered approach to life — to meet people on their own turf, to walk with them in their struggles, to love them, to care for them, to draw them to new levels of faith and life.

Now this would appear to be obvious. Of course ministry is about serving others in Jesus name. Why even talk about it? Because it does not come as naturally as one might think. Why do you think Jesus mentioned it three times in a row? It certainly did not come naturally to Peter. He was quite preoccupied with himself: his world of understanding; his own ego needs; his strategies to make things happen; in short — himself!

And it does not come naturally to us either. It is quite possible to carry on a lot of ministry — motivated by self-centered interest. How does this activity boost my image? Am I being recognized as a good preacher? Do I enjoy what I am doing? Will I be seen as being creative, dynamic, useful? Will they want to keep me around for a while? (Welcome to Peter's world.)

In a chapter entitled, "*Curing Souls: the Forgotten Art*", in his book, *The Contemplative Pastor*, Eugene Peterson suggests that this term — curing souls — is still the best description of what pastors should be doing. It certainly is more profound than to say that a pastor "runs a church".

The phrase sounds antique. It is antique. but it is not obsolete. It catches up and coordinates, better than any other expression I am aware of, the unending warfare against sin and sorrow and the diligent cultivation of grace and faith to which the best pastors have consecrated themselves in every generation. The odd sound of the phrase may even work to advantage by calling attention to how remote present-day pastoral routines have become. (56)

Learn to recognize those moments when you truly have forgotten about your own self interest and entered the world of people in your attempts to participate with God in the cure of souls. May those moments increase!

Be on guard, however, against the temptation to think that everything depends on you. As Peterson says, "*The cure of souls is a cultivated awareness that God has already seized the initiative.*" It is not so much you figuring out a strategy that you can superintend, but to recognize that before you got on the scene, God was already at work. Your challenge is to discern the traces of grace that have already operated in this situation and to blend into the operation of a ministry that God is superintending.

It's like walking in late on a committee meeting. A lot has happened before you got there. You can not assume that the meeting will start over. You are coming in on something that has already been in progress for a long time. So as you feed the sheep, do not try to become the messiah, but take your place along side of the true Messiah, as an undershepherd who cares for the sheep.

Keeping this perspective will help you not to take on more than you are called to do. Pastors have a temptation to flaunt their busyness. They love their date books (Yes, I know they are important.) Look at this month - it is jam packed (Look how important I am! Surely the world would stop turning if I didn't keep up this busy schedule.) Sometimes the Lord takes us up on that challenge, I think, just to prove a point. Busyness is not a sign of holiness, nor is it a measure of one's worth or one's effectiveness in ministry. Peterson suggests that "*A busy pastor is a lazy pastor.*" If you simply let others decide for you what you will do, you will lose focus and become slipshod in your ministry.

In his book, **Stress Fractures**, Chuck Swindoll states that trying to do too much ourselves will invariably produce stress fractures in our lives that eventually break us.

All of us have a limit. If those huge freight trucks on the highway have a load limit, you can be sure each one of us does too. When we try to do more than we are designed to do our level of anxiety immediately begins to rise. This is a common problem among strong natural leaders who assume too much responsibility... When the bow stays bent too long it occasionally snaps. Even Christians can crack up.

A lesson I have learned, and relearned, and continue to learn is that need does not constitute a call. If I had 25 hours a day to respond to needs around me, I could not even

touch them all. Good leaders — good pastors — do not scurry about touching as many needs as possible. They respond deliberately, and lovingly to the needs that God calls them to respond to. That means learning to say NO. Ken Handrich, a long time friend and ministry partner of mine, used to say to me that faithful ministry means saying a lot of NOs and a few profound YESs.

Feed My Sheep! Feeding sheep is at the same time an ordinary, servant job as well as a noble profession. The high and mighty of this world do not feed animals. Shepherds are humble folk, willing to live with sheep through thick and thin, endure the smells and suffer themselves for the welfare of their flock. Yet it is perhaps the most common image of ministry in the scriptures. Jesus said, *I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. I know my sheep and my sheep know me.*

Keep this paradoxical image ever before you — a humble servant with a noble profession. You are not the great shepherd, nor the great physician. That distinction remains for our Lord. But as an undershepherd you carry the distinguishing features of the great shepherd. So, really, your greatest challenge is to become more and more like Jesus. Grow in grace in order to dispense grace as you Feed the Sheep.

But there is more!

GOING TO PLACES YOU'D RATHER NOT BE

In our text, Jesus makes a prediction: *I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go. Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, "Follow me!"*

Along with Jesus, I too will make a prediction for you, Carl. If you truly love Jesus and seek to follow him as a shepherd, it will take you to places you would rather not go. But you should know that Jesus has been down that road before you. Jesus knows about the desert road; the dark night of the soul. He knows about the journey from Galilee to Jerusalem, that foreboding place of death. He knows about the storms that threaten to swamp the boat. He knows about detractors and the opponents who would like to push you over the edge. He knows about the agony of abandonment. Places you would rather not go, but places you must go if you want to mature as a follower of Jesus.

"Can't I just love God and feed sheep and have a good life while I'm at it? Henry Nouwen says No. *It means the road of downward mobility in the midst of an upwardly mobile world. I do not say this with sadness, but joyfully, because the downward road of God is the road on which he reveals himself to us as God with us.*

Craig Barnes responds by saying, *Nobody wants to be on the road to downward mobility. If you aspire to it, you don't understand it. It costs too much. It runs counter to the road we desire to travel — the one that leads to upward mobility.*

How negative can a father be? Would it not be kinder of me to suggest that the road you are taking is filled with sunshine, roses, pleasant breezes and sweet repose? Well, let me assure you there will be lots of sunshine and pleasant breezes. Mom and I have certainly had our share since my ordination in 1973. We have experienced joy, fulfillment, adventure, community, and friendships. We have lived with purpose, and have had the delights of seeing some of the fruit of our labors. We live with few regrets. All these positive experiences will be yours as well. I wish them for you, and I pray that you will know happiness in the ministry.

But God has also taken us to many places we would rather not have gone. And it is safe to say that it is in those places where we have learned more about God and ourselves, about grace and hope, about love and forgiveness, and about joyful abandonment of cherished dreams than we did in the more pleasant pastures. We have learned that flowers can bloom in the desert, that stars shine brightest when it is the darkest, and that the darkness of the desert road is a warm darkness.

We are learning that difficult people in our lives often reveal more about ourselves than about themselves — that in effect the people we would rather flee from than feed can be God's instruments for our growth. We have learned that when everything is going great, we had better take a picture because chances are that this is a quiet repose before Jesus will invite us to experiences and places to which we would rather not go. Jesus keeps moving us away from places where we would prefer to stay to places we do not really want to go. But when he does, you can be sure that he is leading you into a new cycle of grace and growth and abandonment of all we are and have into the hand of a loving heavenly father.

CONCLUSION

Love Jesus, feed his sheep, and be prepared to go places you would rather not go to. And so take your place with Peter, and the great throng of persons whom God has called throughout the centuries to serve him in public ministry.

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