

In the Spirit and Truth of today being a Service of Ordination and Installation and Commissioning of Elders in the life of First Presbyterian Church of Lynchburg, it is a fitting opportunity to dissect a bit God’s call and mission for the church and how we are not only invited to participate but empowered to faithfully fulfill God’s call. Whereas there will be 6 individuals presented for Ordination, Installation, and Commissioning, the message about leading in God’s church is not only for them, but every one of us.

I have come to believe it inevitable in the course of a year, the questions of “What is the church? What is the role of the church?” surfaces during conversation and discussion. If it is not spoken exactly like that, the questions are implied. In the uncertainty of what the church is and its role, we can all likely see (or maybe have even experienced) how the church has spent some time trying to jump tracks and, in some cases, even derailed. Rather than leave the doors and windows open for interpretation, Peter has a few thoughts on exactly what the church is and its role as a people seeking to glorify God.

It is widely known and nearly a consensus among all that the primary purpose of the church and its role is the glorification of God. Where things begin to get murky is in defining what that looks like? How can we, as God’s church, Christ’s body, today know whether we are being faithful to God in our calling and not just picking up another set of tracks?

In 1 Peter 4:7-11 Peter highlights the church’s call to PRAYER, MUTUAL LOVE, HOSPITALITY, AND THE SHARING OF GIFTS.

Prayer is talking with God, and we can’t talk to God enough. Mind you, sometimes prayer is most effective when we actually stop talking and listen. Nevertheless, perhaps the acronym A.S.A.P. can help- Always Say A Prayer. Whatever we have coming up next, it is always a good idea to PRAY. And the PRAYER Peter embraces here in this text is communal or congregational prayer. The call is that we pray together, as one voice, recognizing, sharing, appreciating, each other’s cares and concerns and celebrations. Prayer alone is great. Pray on! Prayer together as the church is God’s jukebox and God likes to play the jukebox loud!

The call to MUTUAL LOVE may be a bit trickier, but we must do our best. The embodiment of MUTUAL LOVE is best witnessed in Christ as he sought to bring the good news and salvation of God to all; those who followed him closely; those who didn’t get it and likely wouldn’t get it; even those seeking to combat and rebuke his every effort, act, or message. “Life and work in the Christian mission require that people look away from their own rights and concerns, that

they not be too easily offended by the (foibles) of their fellow Christians, lest the mission to which the church is called be neglected. Not every emotional and psychic bruise can be given attention; otherwise, all the church's energy for mission and witness would be burned up in damage control." (Craddock 1995). For Peter, it was imperative for all members of the community to participate in establishing a community of mutual love, support, and service to each other. MUTUAL LOVE is a key to building a relationship and relationships are imperative to the church because it is the love and support of one another that helps the church as a community survive against threats and suffering while continuing to seek God's mission and ministry.

How does a church establish a community of MUTUAL LOVE? Peter says it is by embodying HOSPITALITY through the recognition and valuing of each congregant present. And what does that look like? It is treating each person with the same respect we would all show to Jesus if he were to be the one who walked in and sat down next to us. Guess what? He has. He is. After all, as God's children, we are all created in the image of God. When someone walks through the doors of this building, or when we encounter someone in our daily life routine and activities, they are all a someone, and as a someone they are worthy of the hospitality of Christ. Maybe you have been that someone at some point. If not, maybe you could try to think about how you would like to be received. HOSPITALITY in God's church is the gift of each of us being guest and host.

And I love this illustration for the SHARING OF GIFTS. A sea captain and his chief engineer were arguing over who was most important to the ship. To prove their point to each other, they decided to swap places. The chief engineer ascended to the bridge, and the captain went to the engine room. Several hours later, the captain suddenly appeared on deck covered with oil and dirt. "Chief!" he yelled, waving aloft a monkey wrench. "You have to get down there; I can't make her go!" "Of course, you can't," replied the chief. "She's aground!" On a team we don't excel each other; we depend on each other.

What is the church? What is the role of the church? At the very least, Peter says it is a body of people gathered together to glorify God by PRAYING, MUTUAL LOVE, HOSPITALITY, AND SHARING GIFTS. And this next part is pivotal, there are no bystanders in this call. God's mission and ministry is most effective when everyone participates, and everyone leads.

And before any of us get the idea or have the temptation to suggest that "I" will do this, but "someone else" can do that, when it comes to PRAYING, MUTUAL LOVE, HOSPITALITY, AND SHARING GIFTS, we are all called, and dare say equipped to get it done. On the one hand, the mission and ministry of the church is humanly impossible without God. However, on the other hand, with God, through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit at work in each of us, we

are all made to be *“God’s ministers- God’s choice servants- whom God has called to minister to God’s precious people.”*

It is not enough for the church to settle for the 80-20 rule, where 80% of the work is accomplished by 20% of the people, or even more accurately in the last 10 years is the 90-10 rule, where 90% of the work is being accomplished by only 10% of the people. The mission and ministry of God’s church is most effectively implemented and experienced when everyone (You, You, You, Me) all works together.

In theological terms, this is known as the “Priesthood of all believers” or as Paul put it “the royal priesthood.” This celebrates that we are all chosen, claimed, called, and empowered to be “the salt of the earth and the light of the world” (Matthew 5:16-20); vessels of God’s mission; instruments of God’s purpose; teachers, leaders, prayer warriors, servers, care takers, hosts, witnesses, and bearers of God’s name. This is what it is to be a Christian; a disciple of Jesus; a believer and follower of God; a member of the church; a minister. The call of ministry does not rest and bear fruit only upon the hands of pastors or preachers, but instead rests and bears fruit within the heart of every child of God. In God’s church, like the cast and crew of a play or the roster of a team, we all have a role to play. As members of Christ’s body, we all matter and because we all matter, we all need to lead.

Then who are the elders (the session) and what are they doing? I thought they, along with the staff, were the leaders of the church? I will unpack this more in a moment, but elders are not elected in the Presbyterian Church, and staff called or hired, so that the rest of the church can sit back and watch. The ordination, installation, and commission of an elder, and the call or work of staff, is only possible as the rest of us come alongside them in prayer and participation. Elders are not called to serve themselves for a 3-year term, or even a small group within the congregation, and then put a check in the box. Elders are called, however, along with staff, with the intentionality that they will walk with all of us in our collective journey to be the church God is calling us to be at this time and in this place. To dig a bit deeper, electing elders and hiring staff affords authority, but it does not dispose of our individual and collective need to enact acts of leadership necessary to embody God’s mission and ministry. I will put it this way: When everyone leads, when all of us lead and do our part, the effectiveness of those serving as elders is enhanced and enriched, and so is the mission and ministry of God’s church. When everyone leads, when everyone prays, mutually loves, is hospitable, and shares their gifts, we all will benefit.