

## “SHARED MINISTRIES”

### Scripture Lesson: Exodus 18:13-27; Acts 6: 1-7

*This sermon was preached at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church, Charleston, SC, by Dr. Daniel W. Massie on Sunday, September 28, 2008.*

This morning I wish to lift out from our church’s mission statement a phrase that is critically important and, in fact, is essential if we as a congregation of God’s people are going to be and do all that God would have us to be and to do. That phrase is “shared ministries.” I originally planned to deliver this sermon because we are making preparation to institute a Stephen Ministry program in our church in the coming year. This is a program of lay care giving that will train and equip women and men with particular spiritual gifts to assist the ministers in caring for members of our congregation who are in need because of their life’s circumstances. Between 20 & 30 people have already signed up to do a Spiritual Gifts Inventory beginning this next Wednesday and from among them will come a core of people whose strengths and interests would uniquely qualify them to serve as Stephen Ministers. But the issue of shared ministries in the church goes far beyond pastoral care and Stephen Ministry. The fact is that the Lord calls each of us to engage in ministry of some sort. Jesus calls each of us not only into an eternal relationship with him but into a lifestyle and a ministry of service. In the Reformed faith we dare to believe and to proclaim that we are a part of God’s elect people. God chose us before we chose God and furthermore, if we are among the elect, the chosen, then we must never forget that our election is not simply for salvation but also for service.

There are many Biblical warrants for shared ministry but today I direct your attention to two passages. In the New Testament we have Acts 6 where the Apostles set aside seven men to assist in the work of the church and there by established the office of Deacon. The second passage from Exodus 18 tells of the sage advice given by Moses’ father-in-law Jethro as to how the needs of God’s people could more efficiently be met and how the energies of God’s leaders could best be expended.

In the book of Acts there seems to have been some dissention and disturbance, perhaps even discrimination in the life of the early church. The Hellenists, meaning the Greek speaking converts to Christ, believed that their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food to those in need. The other disciples who spoke Hebrew in addition to or instead of Greek, seemed to recognize the problem because they are so busy with other duties such as preaching and teaching that they

decide to set apart seven men who became the first Deacons and ultimately fellow leaders in the early church. Stephen, one of the seven, even became the first martyr of the church. It is interesting that all of the seven men chosen had Greek names, suggesting that the Apostles wanted to make every effort to insure that no group of believers was being neglected or discriminated against. And so it was that early on the work of the Christian church was shared with and extended to other believers who possessed the skills and abilities necessary to render valuable service.

When I was studying in Scotland back in 1974 I bought a fascinating little book by D.P. Thomson that contained Bible studies from the New Testament. In his study of Acts 6 Thomson had an intriguing and somewhat disturbing perspective on the establishment of the office of Deacon. He said that there is nothing to indicate that the Apostles ever consulted with the Lord prior to making the decision to expand the leadership of the church. It just seemed a practical and logical decision to the Apostles but it may also have led to a false distinction between those who render spiritual service, that is Apostles and Elders and those who render temporal service, that is the Deacons. Well, his take on this frankly had bothered me for decades because I personally see no distinction the sacred and the secular, between temporal and secular service. It can be as spiritual to feed the hungry as it can be practical to teach a Sunday school class.

However, as I reflected on our Old Testament lesson from Exodus I found a terrific precedent for exactly what the Apostles did centuries later. I am sure that D. P. Thomson is deceased by now but would love to see what he thought of this passage. So look with me now at Exodus 18 where we find the leader of God's people, Moses, facing a situation comparable to that of the Apostles many generations later. Like the Apostles, Moses too was being overburdened and overwhelmed by increasing responsibilities of leadership and he came to see the wisdom of sharing the work load with others. The way all of this came about is somewhat remarkable.

Note here that in Exodus as in Acts, there is nothing to suggest that the Lord God devised the plan of extending the leadership and the work of the community beyond its already recognized leaders. All of this is not to suggest that God disapproved of the plan. Rather, it is to say that the text itself simply makes no mention of God's approval or disapproval.

The truly amazing thing is that the strategy proposed to Moses came from outside the Jewish community. Jethro, you see, prior to his encounter with Moses had been a priest of another religion

out in the wilderness. True, when he learned from his son-in-law all that God had done to deliver the children of Israel from pharaoh, we read in verses 10 & 11 that he blessed the Lord and acknowledged that the God of the Hebrews was “greater than all gods.”

Some people and some religious communities are so provincial in their perspective and so narrow in their outlook that they cannot see or accept any truth beyond that which is revealed to or through them. Moses is to be commended in that he was open to this insight, to the wisdom of a foreigner, even to the advice of a father-in-law! God’s people have not always been so magnanimous. God’s people have not always recognized that all that truth is God’s truth regardless of its source or its origin. We need to listen voices outside our community because they may well see truths and offer solutions to problems which we are incapable grasping. Sometimes even the Lord’s speaks in a foreign tongue and in an unexpected way.

Now, what was the problem that Jethro observed and how did he offer a solution to it? He sees that Moses is about to experience burnout, working from dawn to dusk trying to help the people resolve spiritual and relational conflicts. Not only is Moses being exhausted depleted personally but so too are the people who are standing in line all day waiting for an audience with their leader (see verse 18). No one could survive for long under this heavy workload. It needed to be shared. So Jethro offers his counsel, his solution if you will.

The advice Jethro gives makes as much sense to a growing urban church today as it did for a wandering band of nomads in the wilderness. Moses may have been a brilliant reformer and an inspiring liberator but Jethro was the one gifted in management and operations. Jethro convinced Moses of the wisdom and the art of delegation. He suggested that Moses should recruit and train other people in the community to adjudicate cases and they could bring the more difficult cases to him on appeal. And that way Moses could share the heavy load of leadership; the people would be better served; the abilities and gifts of others would better be employed; and Jethro’s daughter, Zipporah, Moses’ wife might even have her husband and the father of her children home in time for dinner on occasion!

I think God was pleased with Jethro’s counsel. In time Moses and the Hebrew children embraced it and God blessed it, just as he blessed the decision of the Apostles to expand the leadership responsibilities within the early church. And I believe God still blesses the church when

members embrace their own ministries and employ their gifts and skills and energies in service to Christ and the world. If only a few people help carry the load, they become exhausted and the good work God wishes to accomplish through his people is greatly impeded.

First (Scots) can't hire enough preachers to do all the pastoral care and visitation. That is why a core of committed and trained Stephen Ministers will enable us to reach out to so many more people who need our love and attention. Our church cannot hire enough choristers and musicians to lead us in praising God, enough educators to teach our children and adults, enough youth workers to minister to our teens, enough administrators and secretaries and custodians and housekeepers to keep this church functioning well and growing and serving. We need you – each of you to do your part. No one can do everything but everyone can do something. But what we can do we should do with God's help.

This is a message the 1480 members of this congregation need desperately to hear. We have a serious problem in our church --- one more serious than I even had imagined. I hate to discuss it in public from the pulpit because it is embarrassing quite frankly and our visitors are listening in today. But this is a church family with a dark secret that cannot be suppressed. This secret can only be addressed if we deal with it openly and honestly.

If you read the lead article on Stewardship in the Sentinel that went out this past week, then surely you see the nature our malady and how serious it is.

Our church administrator has just completed a review of our congregational giving for the operations budget for the calendar year of 2007. The results are discouraging, even disturbing.

No doubt you have heard of the 80/20 principle in which in nearly every organization 80% of the work and 80% of the support comes from 20% of the members that fact would be disturbing to any organization but it is incomprehensible for a Christian church where ever member is asked to give of his and her time, talent and treasure to the work of Christ's church. Each member of this congregation promised upon joining that you would support the worship and work of this church to the best of your ability. The sad reality is that we have not kept this promise as a people.

The 80/20 principle does not apply to First (Scots). It is even worse than that. According to our data recently gathered 20% of our givers contribute 91% of the operations. Thank God for the few people who have worked hard and given generously. Because of you and your sacrificial efforts our church is growing and appears at least to be thriving. But when you consider what we could be doing with the resources and skills we possess, we are hardly thriving.

Go home and study the giving graph again. Ask yourself where am I on this graph and where ought I to be? When you read it I think you will wonder as I do how it could be that nearly 60% of our members, 852 of 1480 members on the active roll of our church did not contribute a single dime to the church in all of 2007. Another 214 members gave slightly over \$3 a week. People tip their barber or their waiter more than that routinely.

Now keep in mind that I do not know what anyone in this church gives, other than my wife and me. I do not want to know because my message can then be the same to all of our members regardless of your wealth or your poverty, your presence or your absence. I don't want to be tempted to change God's word because of who my listeners are or what they have.

As disturbing as our giving patterns are, my suspicion is that our ministry patterns would reflect a similar imbalance. I suspect that 20% of our members also do 91% of our ministry. I suspect that the ones who give to the church are the same ones whose hearts are in the work of the church. Jesus taught this truth --- "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." (Matthew 6:21) I suspect furthermore, though I could never prove it, that it is the ones who give who also teach our children, who sing in our choir, who serve at Crisis Ministries, who go on mission trips, who build Habitat Houses, who keep the nursery, who usher, who attend Sunday School and Bible studies, who participate in prayer groups, who serve on committees, etc, etc, etc.

In the coming months you will hear us talking a great deal about M & M's which stands for Members in Ministry. We do not need any more nominal members in this church. We don't need anymore names on the church rolls. We need more members in ministry, more members discovering and using their God given gifts in the ministry of Christ's church.

Some people join large churches like ours because it is easier to hide there. It is easier to avoid work and to escape notice. It is easier to have the benefits of membership without the costs. A

little girl was asked why her family had left the Methodist church to join the Episcopal Church. She said: “My parents say they like the lethargy of the Episcopal Church.” I imagine that her parents had said liturgy instead of lethargy, but maybe not. Maybe they were being brutally honest. And as our own data suggests, the Episcopal Church and no church has a corner on lethargy. It is a disease that has attacked the body of Christ in all denominations and we are suffering from it as well.

This morning I challenge you to join me in curing this disease and finding a way to enable all of our members to share in the work of Christ’s church.

In recent days some of you have been distraught and worried over the national economy and the financial markets and what the instability might portend for the future of this nation. Financial institutions may well fail in the future as they have in the past. But how many people are equally concerned about the church failing? If the church fails to get its message out it really won’t matter what the markets do because we will not have a society worth preserving anyway. The values and principles which have shaped the character of this land will have been lost because of the unwillingness of ordinary believers to make the sacrifices and the decisions which would enable the church of Jesus Christ to fulfill its mission. Amen.

**PRAYER:**

Almighty God, through the wisdom, zeal, and love of Jethro and Moses, and the Apostles and Stephen and the other deacons, your people were organized for ministries that reached far beyond the capacities of the few. We thank you that you call us into your church and that you equip us to serve you there. Enable all of us and each of us to discover our ministry and to make the commitments necessary to carry out the work you give us to do individually and corporately, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.