



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“TENDING GOD’S FLOCK”

Scripture Lessons: I Peter 5:1-5

This sermon was preached at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina, by Dr. Daniel W. Massie on Sunday, June 14, 2009.

As we ordain and install our recently elected Elders and Deacons who have gone through their training and now have been examined and approved by the Session, I thought I would share with them and you some of the advice that the Apostle Paul offered to fellow Elders in the first century. He is addressing these leaders in the early church and his exhortation applies equally to Elders and Deacons and to all persons who would serve in positions of leadership in Christ’s church. He speaks of the perils and privileges attached to leadership in the church. He tells his readers that they have had a part of God’s flock committed to their charge and if they would serve them faithfully and well, under the guidance of the “Chief Shepherd”, who would be Jesus Christ, then there were certain traits that should characterize their service.

To begin with, if they are to serve rightly the flock of God committed to their charge, their service must be willing and eager, not restrained as if under compulsion. This warning should prompt each of us, officers and members alike, to ask whether our service in Christ’s church is willing and eager or if we view our service as some kind of grim but necessary duty.

In the church or in any other arena of life, you can always spot the persons who undertake their assignments with eagerness rather than resentment, because they may not simply because they must. It is a mark of maturity as well as a Christian virtue to do with a cheerful spirit what must be done anyway --- in the family, in the work place and especially in the church. This eager and willing attitude is not simply a part of our task. Rather, it is a part of our witness as disciples. It is quite possible for a person to discharge their duties in such an unpleasant and ungracious matter that they spoil the experience for those they are meant to serve. Husbands and wives, parents and children, employers and employees, Elders and Deacons and countless disciples engaging in various ministries need to keep this in mind. And it applies to life both outside and inside the church, but especially does it apply if we are tending to God’s fragile and beloved flock.

Secondly, Peter reminds those in charge of God’s flock that their service should not be motivated by “sordid gain.” Other versions of the Bible say, “Do your work not for mere pay but from a real desire to serve.” (TEV) Or, “Not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind.” (KJV) And so with this in mind and given the state of our country’s economy and our church’s budget challenges we have decided to reduce the wages for all officers in the coming year! Of course, you realize that I am kidding! Actually it is believed by some that there was a small stipend paid to church officers in the early years of Christianity because so many of them had sacrificed everything in order to answer the call of Christ to become leaders among his flock.

Now for our purposes the sense of Peter’s admonition here is that we should serve, not because of what we will get out of it, but rather because we are eager to serve the Lord and his people. Christian service should never be inspired from selfish or self-serving interests. And yet in the course of my ministry I have occasionally run into officers or ministers or other leaders in the church who give the impression that their service will simply be a star in their crown, a feather in their cap, or an impressive item on their résumé. Granted, you may well find your service to the Lord and to others as personally beneficial and a

blessing to you more so than you ever imagined but this should be a bonus and not a prerequisite for our ministries within the church. As you new officers are ordained and installed today I charge you to think not of what this can mean to you, but rather concentrate on what your service can mean to others.

Thirdly, Peter says that as one tends the flock of God he should do so “not as domineering over those in your charge but being examples to the flock.” Now while it is true that a certain amount of authority does come with leadership positions within the church, it is better exercised by example than by exhortation. Surely you must realize that a flock of sheep must be led. You can not drive sheep as you drive cattle, getting behind them and pushing them and prodding them and snapping whips and making noises. If a shepherd wishes to lead his sheep in a certain direction he walks ahead of them and they follow and trust in confidence. It is like this with God’s flock as well.

As officers, we must never expect of church members that which we ourselves are unwilling to do. We are to do out of a sense of duty what others are invited to do out of love. If you expect people to be involved in the worship and study of the church as an Elder then you must walk ahead of them and set the example. As a Deacon, if you expect people to give of themselves and their resources sacrificially or to support ministries of compassion and service, then you must give them a model to follow. Show them how it can be done with God’s help. How can you sell to others something that you yourself would not buy? How can you promote attendance when you are absent? How can you lead when part of your flock is looking back at you waiting for you to catch up? So whether you like it or not you WILL be an example. The only question is whether you will be a positive or a negative example. Even as I say this I realize that we are calling people to focus on and to follow Jesus Christ but nevertheless our walk and our talk should serve as examples as well.

All of God’s people need positive role models and sheep in particular need a fellow sheep to lead them and to model for them the actions and decisions that will prove beneficial and even redemptive.

I recently read a fascinating story about “Big Horn Sheep” and the failed attempts of a man named Scott Russell Sanders to reestablish flocks of these magnificent animals in the mountains and desert regions of the American West, where once they flourished and where now they have become scarce in recent decades. Time and time again Mr. Sanders released herds of Big Horned Sheep into areas where they formerly had flourished but he did so with no success. Eventually, however, he discovered the reason for his failed attempts.

Apparently the problem with sheep raised in a controlled environment where everything needed is provided, miss out on a crucial element necessary for their survival. Some things can only be learned in a natural way and sheep are dependent upon the older and experienced sheep to know how to move between the normal summer range and the winter ranges where food can be found. This migration pattern is not a native instinct among Big Horned Sheep and can only be learned from other sheep. If this association, if this modeling is not available then the memory of the right paths to take will be lost.

Like sheep in the wilds, sheep in the church need the lessons and the examples of those who go before them. Those who have been told the good news must tell others. Those who have encountered the dangers and the delights along the Christian walk must help those who look to them if they are to avoid the pit falls and discover the blessings of life in this community.

And so we need one another. When God’s sheep become scattered and isolated they can easily lose their way. As we continue through this season of being out of most of our church facilities during our demolition and reconstruction period, it is especially incumbent upon all of us, particularly our officers, to participate in the more limited programs of worship, study, fellowship, and mission. Let us not get lost and let us not lose our connectedness within this flock known as First (Scots) Presbyterian Church.

Yet another trait needed by those who would serve God's flock is a deep and genuine sense of humility. Christian leadership is never domineering nor condescending. Some people who rise to positions of leadership never realize this. With their titles and their privileges they forget their calling. Disciples of Christ must be different, however. Jesus told his followers on one occasion, "You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them. But it shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve." (Mark 10:42-45)

Therefore in conclusion, those of us who would tend God's flock faithfully and well must serve willingly, not by constraint; we must serve sacrificially and not with a view toward what's in it for us; and we must serve in an exemplary and humble fashion and not with a false sense of important or position. Peter directs us: "Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for 'God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.'" Humility is truly one of the most necessary traits a church officer or Christian leader can display, second only to faithfulness perhaps. One must be prepared to realize during the course of his or her service that they will not have all the answers; they will not win every vote; and no one's opinion from the greatest to the least is indispensable.

As we continue with this service of ordination and installation let us stay and say what we believe using a portion of the Declaration of Faith.