

Choosing a Pastor

a sermon by Rev. D. Thomas Ford, Jr.
Salem Lutheran Church
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Grace be unto you, and peace, from God Our Father and Our Risen Lord and Savior Jesus The Christ!

I rejoice with you that the time is very close when you will vote to call a pastor. You have prayed. You have persevered. Your Call Committee has worked diligently, long, hard and smart. All the while, you as a congregation have continued in doing well The Lord's ministries in and through Salem Lutheran Church. Bishop Nelson and all the supply and interim pastors who have served here in the interim are very proud of you. You can be very proud of yourselves.

However, since after today, I will not preach here again on Sunday mornings until May 25, I have decided to preach 3 sermons in 1 today. It shouldn't take more than an hour! I'm glad you're laughing! You know I'm not that crazy!

I do want to share some reflections with you this morning on pastoral ministry itself and on the business of becoming a pastor and choosing a pastor.

Today is the 7th Sunday of Easter and the Sunday following The Ascension of Our Lord, which was this past Thursday. Today's Second Reading from Acts described The Ascension and some of what happened in the early church immediately following The Ascension.

To review quickly: St. Luke tells us (but wait, as I summarize what St. Luke says, hear it as if it is right now and you the members of Salem are the 11 disciples – 11 means there is a vacancy!): on the day of The Ascension, the 11 disciples were gathered together in Jeru - salem. The Lord appeared to them, told them not to depart from Jeru - salem, (in other words, don't jump ship!) but to wait on the Holy Spirit. (waiting is no fun, is it?) Their immediate response was to ask the Lord, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (In other words, Lord, let's get this show on the road!) The Lord's response was: "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority." (In other words, just cool it! God, not you, is the one in control.) Instead, the Lord said, you will receive the power of the Holy Spirit and "... be my witnesses in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth." (In other words, I have a plan and will give you the spirit-power to make it happen.) As soon as the Lord

had said this, he was taken up into heaven. The disciples stood there looking up into the heavens. (Do you think they were longing for the good old days?) Two angels appear to them (disguised as men in white robes) and tell them that the Lord will come again in the same way that he went. (In other words, don't waste your time heaven gazing. Get on with doing what the Lord told you to do.) So the 11 disciples return to the Upper Room in Jeru - salem and with the women, including Jesus' mother and brothers, devote themselves to prayer. This is what we are told in today's Second Reading. In the 9 verses following today's Second Reading, St. Luke tells us about the very first thing the 11 disciples did, other than pray. It was very simply to ask the Lord to show them the one the Lord himself had chosen to fill the vacant disciple position. The one the Lord chose was Matthias. They chose him over Barsabbas. Both were available. Only one could be chosen. The Lord did the choosing. The 11 participated by casting lots, the ancient form of voting.

Did you ever wonder why Matthias and Barsabbas wanted to be an apostle? Do you ever wonder what motivates a pastor to want to be a pastor?

This coming June 3, I will have been an ordained Lutheran Pastor for 35 years. Until I was 13 I was convinced I was going to play center field for the New York Yankees. Then one afternoon while playing Babe Ruth League baseball I saw a 15-year-old boy hit a baseball 450 feet, and I realized it was time to reassess my career plans.

About that time, a new pastor at my church, Pastor Dasher, got me interested in the German theologian and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He also got me interested in the theologian and doctor Albert Schweitzer. I started reading books like *The Cost of Discipleship*. And before the year was over, I began to seriously ask whether God was calling me to the ministry.

I didn't know it at the time, but in their own way, my grandma and my parents were already in on the conspiracy. The year before Pastor Dasher came was 1959. Eisenhower was in the White House. The Dodgers had moved to Los Angeles. I was 12. It was summer, the week of July 4. I was outside in the field on our small North Carolina farm. I was practicing my swing, hitting rocks with a stick. I had just hit an unbelievable home run when Grandma called.

"Tommy," she said, "I want you to do something for me. Mr. Moffitt is being released from prison this morning. He will be coming down the road in about an hour. I want you to go down to the foot of the hill and wait for him. He will be dressed in white. Tell him he is invited to dinner and to come on up to the house."

My grandma was a 4'11", snuff-dipping woman who could outwork any two men and often did. She was not the kind of grandma you ignored! I said, "Yes ma'am," and I ran to the bottom of the hill and waited.

Jim Moffitt and his dirt-poor family had been neighbors ever since I could remember. They were what many people then called "white trash." Jim, Edith, and their seven barefoot children had lived in a two-room shack about 300 yards from us until six years before, when one day, something snapped in Jim's head during a fight with Edith and he cut her throat with a butcher knife. Edith survived, Jim was sent to prison, and the children were put into foster homes.

My heart was pounding as I waited. I thought, "Old Man Moffitt! That jail bird! He's liable to have a knife in his boot!"

In a little while I saw 'Old Man Moffitt' coming down the road. He was dressed in a white shirt and white pants, standard day-of-release dress for prisoners then. When he got within 50 yards of me, I yelled, "Mr. Moffitt! Grandma said you're invited to dinner today!"

I turned and ran up the hill toward our house. Mr. Moffitt followed. When I ran into the house, I was dumbstruck. Mom and Grandma had prepared a dinner table like I had only seen at Thanksgiving or Christmas. White table cloth. Best china and silverware. Ham and chicken. Every kind of vegetable. Several cakes and pies.

When Mr. Moffitt knocked at the backdoor, Grandma called out, "Hello Jim! Come on in. Welcome back." And she had Old Man Moffitt *sit beside me*.

Mom and Grandma taught me that summer day in 1959 what the Good News of Jesus Christ means. It means reaching out to love others, even if they're branded unlovely or undesirable. It means providing hospitality to people, including those in dire straits. We do not have to approve of someone's actions to show them compassion. And we must never let fear get in the way of acting compassionately to help someone. It was the greatest sermon I ever received.

By the time Pastor Dasher left our parish for a new call in 1964, I had resolved that I would become a pastor and ask God to use me to announce the Good News of Jesus Christ in words and in action. God heard my prayer and allowed me to serve as a Pastor, with most of my career as a Pastor being in the specialized area of social ministry, helping to minister to many people like Old Man Moffitt.

Although I can tell you this my story, I do not know what led Matthias to want to be an apostle. I'm sure he would have told you. I think it's an important thing to ask, as I'm sure your Call Committee has asked numerous Pastors over the last 12 months. And it is an answer that I am sure you will soon receive directly from Pastor Christenson.

In 1971, two years before I was ordained, I read a book entitled The Alphabet of Grace by Frederick Buechner, a Presbyterian Pastor, a former Chaplain of Philips Exeter Academy and perhaps the greatest Christian creative writer of the last 85 years. [The Seabury Press, New York, 1970.]

In the first part of the book, Buechner writes, “In an elegant house on Long Island one summer Sunday, down a long table cluttered with silver and crystal and the faces and hands of strangers, my hostess suddenly directs a question at me. She is deaf and speaks in the ringing accents of the deaf, and at the sound of her question all other conversation stops, and every face turns to hear my answer. ‘I understand that you and planning to enter the ministry,’ she says. ‘Is this your own idea, or have you been poorly advised?’

“I had no answer, and even if I’d had one, it wouldn’t have be shoutable, and even if I’d shouted it, she couldn’t have heard it, so the question was never answered and thus rings still unanswered in my head. How did I ever get involved in this business to begin with? By what implausible train of circumstances do I find myself standing here now? Why should the words of Jesus move me more than I can say? ---Come unto me.” pp. 40-41.

Then, near the end of the book, Buechner picks up this theme again, writing, “‘I hear you are entering the ministry,’ the woman said down the long table, meaning no real harm. ‘Was it your own idea or were you poorly advised?’ And the answer that she could not have heard even if I had given it was that it was not my idea at all, neither my own nor anyone else’s. It was a lump in the throat. It was an itching in the feet. It was a stirring in the blood at the sound of rain. It was a sickening of the heart at the sight of misery. It was a clamoring of ghosts. It was a name which, when I wrote it out in a dream, I knew was a name worth dying for even if I was not brave enough to do the dying myself and could not even name the name for sure. Come unto me, all ye who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you a high and driving peace. I will condemn you to death.” pp. 109-110. [Meaning, of course, dying with Christ is selfless service.]

It is a very sacred thing for God to choose a person to be a pastor. It is a very sacred thing for a parish to participate with God in the calling of a pastor. God’s will for the parish and for the pastor must be paramount. God’s will.

How do you decide? The Lord is guiding you. Listen to The Lord. Continue to pray.

In closing, I assure you and Pastor Christenson of my prayers. And I share with you something Pastor Dasher shared with me when I asked him a year before he died (in 2006 at the age of 72) if he could give any guidance to congregations and pastors seeking to know God’s will. (He had worked many years as a Bishop’s assistant, helping congregations in the call process) Here, verbatim, is what he said:

1. A pastor must have a love for the people that must show above everything else.
2. There is only one Savior and the Pastor does not qualify for that role.
3. Truth is not absolute and there is always room for dialogue.

4. Pastors must take God's grace seriously so that they do not have to take themselves too seriously.
5. Ministry happens more through listening than telling.
6. In a society which stresses function, property, and power, pastors must emphasize the importance of relationship and community.
7. In a society which promises value as a reward through the right address, right position, right power, or right skin color, pastors live out the fatherhood and motherhood of God and the kinship of all people.
8. Pastors must affirm that anyone with whom they disagree is nevertheless a child of the heavenly Father.
9. The church as institution is in a mess. But God has used stables and crosses, simple shepherds and ruthless kings, reluctant prophets and brave theologians, hippies and conservatives, to make known the liberating Good News of justice, love, mercy, and forgiveness. And God will continue to do so.

Let us pray:

O God, we thank you for this day and the happy news and your call to us to be your servants and messengers of love and mercy. And we thank you for the one you have chosen to be the Pastor of this congregation. This congregation seeks to know your will as to the one you have chosen. Lead them. Guide them. Love them. Bless them soon with a Pastor. Let your will be done. For the sake of your son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. We continue this prayer, dear Lord, in the words of the hymn, "Lord, You Give The Great Commission."

