



CELEBRATING ASSOCIATE CLERGY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, July 17, 2011

Judy D. Cummings, Guest Lectionary Commentator

Pastor, New Covenant Christian Church, (Disciples of Christ), Nashville, TN

Lection – Ephesians 4:11-13 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 11) The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, (v. 12) to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, (v. 13) until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

In the Church there is a greater probability that one will find a date for the celebration of the senior pastor's anniversary rather than for an associate clergy on the church calendar. Often taken for granted, the work of associate clergy is often overlooked. Churches have not historically celebrated the work, gifts, or role of associate clergy.

Setting aside a special day in the life of the church to honor their work will do much for the morale of those serving in this position and will help the Church better understand that as the body of Christ, we are to "give honor to whom honor is due" (Romans 13:7).

Even the world understands that to give honor to whom honor is due is a good thing. National Employee Appreciation Day was started in 1995 as a day to honor employees everywhere. It is a day to let your employees know that you appreciate and value their hard work. National Employee Appreciation Day is celebrated on the first Friday in March.¹ Why must the Church lag behind?

Having a unique historical role in the African American Church, a pastor had to be so many things to so many people because of the grave needs of the African American community. However, for far too long a special place of significance has been placed on the role of pastor to the seeming exclusion of all other roles. This exclusion has not

provided a good model for the Church or those not called to pastor when it comes to the Church having respect for and appreciation of the gifts of non-senior pastors. This has been particularly harmful to women clergy who have only begun to gain a foothold in the African American Church in the last twenty-five years. Even with stellar training, they are often not financially compensated yet are expected to provide first-class assistance to pastors without complaining.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Ephesians 4:11-13

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

According to Blake Dickinson about 60 percent of Protestant pastors serve in small churches, with an average weekly attendance of 100 or less. The median salary, including housing, for these pastors was \$22,300–\$36,000. The median salary for pastors who serve in large churches (with 351 to 1,000 in attendance) averages \$59,315–\$66,003.²

The pay for an associate clergy is significantly lower than that of a senior pastor, that is if they are paid at all. With so many churches experiencing a decline in membership³ and with many churches feeling the effects of a declining economy, it is not likely that the associate clergy pay scale will increase with any significance in the near future.

But a well-trained, dedicated, associate clergy is invaluable to the work of the Church. Serving in important support roles, associate clergy aid pastors in equipping the saints and building up the body of Christ. Associate clergy are present visiting hospitals, visiting prisons, sitting with families in their hour of bereavement, teaching Sunday School classes, teaching Bible Study classes, giving leadership to church committees, providing oversight for successful church annual days, writing letters for pastors, running errands for pastors, providing counseling to members, attending community events, serving as minister of Christian education and evangelism, serving as minister to children and youth, young adults, and senior saints, serving as executive ministers, and the list goes on and on!

Special moments are important in everyone's life. To that end, creating an event to celebrate, honor, and show appreciation and to tell associate clergy how much we value them and their contributions to the Church would be a blessing in their lives and in the life of the Church.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus was circulated among many churches in the region that were in need of encouragement and strength. Paul writes to encourage his readers to live in spiritual unity, understanding the strength that comes from being joined together with Christ. After preaching and teaching in Ephesus, Paul saw many convert from paganism to Christianity. These new converts were subject to false teachers (Paul calls them "savage wolves" in Acts 20:29), and therefore the saints required constant teaching and pastoral care to sustain them on their spiritual journey. There is no doubt that

Priscilla and Aquila and others whom Paul left to continue the ministry in Ephesus needed help to shepherd the Church of God.

In our text, Paul paints a picture of the Church and its various ministries and offices necessary for it to function, be unified, and be victorious for Christ. The New Testament gives a clear record of the numerous and types of gifts of Christ gives to those who love him. His “unsearchable riches” are freely lavished upon his own. Paul taught that as members of the household of faith we are the recipients of the gift of grace and other spiritual gifts that are to be used for service to Christ and to build up the Church within and without. In addition to the gifts that Paul list in 1 Corinthians chapters 12, 13, and 14, and in Romans 12:6ff, he list gifts in our text that are given sovereignly by the ascended Christ to equip believers for the work of ministry and to edify the body of Christ, *some...apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers*. It is Christ who calls persons to the office of apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor, and teacher, and fits each person for the office they are to hold.

Clearly from this list of gifts there are those who are set apart as spiritual laborers with distinct roles. Those with gifts for various offices in the Church are those who are to work to engage the body of Christ to come into full faith and knowledge of the Lord, that is, they do the work that equips others to live out their biblical commitments to Christ in culture. Pastors, associate clergy, and other leaders in the Church are charged to stir the saints to discover their (those of the saints) gifts. They are to help the saints along their journey of spiritual growth and maturity so that they may take up the work of ministering to the rest of the body and to those outside the Church who need to see Christ exemplified and who need the salvation Christ provides. The Church is intended to be both servant and minister disciples for Christ who function as a “priesthood of all believers.”

We have often viewed the list of spiritual gifts given in our text as if each of these roles were executed in isolation, especially the role of pastor. When we look at the organization of the Church and what is needed for the Church to be mission-driven, it is clear that pastoring in the twenty-first century requires teamwork. Bishop Michael Lee Graves says that, “Dream work takes Teamwork.” Given all of the needs that mark these times, we need ministry leaders who can allow God to help them dream big dreams. Then they will need a dream team to help bring those dreams to fruition.

Many people attend churches with an average attendance of 350 or more members.⁴ Once a church has reached a certain membership size, associate clergy and other staff are required to assist the pastor with the daily operations and ministry formation and execution. People come to church with many needs and the church designs ministries to meet those needs. The senior pastor simply cannot do it all, and certainly God does not expect him or her to do it all alone. Moses, suffering from pastoral burnout, frustration, and anger, complained that the burden of the people was too heavy for him to bear alone. God agrees that Moses should not bear the burden alone. God tells Moses to choose seventy elders to assist him (Numbers 11:10-17). But even in smaller churches with 150

members or less, associate clergy help pastors (some of whom are bi-vocational) minister to congregations and communities.

Far too few associate clergy are paid or even receive a small financial stipend. Most if not all of them are bi-vocational, and still they manage to give countless hours to the Church and aid to pastors. Some come to the Church from corporate America with gifts and skills that the Church needs and that undergird the work of the senior pastor. To do ministry and to do it effectively, pastors need help. And when the Lord sends help, the church ought to say thank you in tangible ways to those who provide it.

Challenge

We can all remember how much it meant to have one of those special moments where we were recognized and appreciated by others, such as birthdays, graduations, and job promotions. Whether they were moments that recognized milestones in one's life or career or moments that just said, "You are well thought of," they meant a lot to us. While we typically celebrate the work of senior pastors and should do so, we also should set aside a day to honor associates who labor in the Church, help her carry out her mission, and help the body of Christ to mature in the faith. Senior pastors must take the lead in teaching Churches that associate clergy are to be honored and appreciated. Since we also benefit from the work of these tireless workers, as pastors we must be among the first to say so. Give honor to whom honor is due.

Descriptive Details

Thoughtful consideration of the passage will reveal details such as:

Sights: Long lines of associate clergy accepting the gifts and tools they will use to encourage, instruct, and spiritually improve the lives of those entrusted to them; associate clergy sitting in hospital rooms; associate clergy sitting in meetings representing senior pastors; and

Sounds: Associate clergy praying for persons in need; associate clergy teaching classes; associate clergy giving leadership to committees; and associate clergy leading worship services.

III. Other Sermonic Comments or Suggestions

(a) **Ordain Associate Clergy:** When associate clergy are licensed and ordained by a congregation and denominations, it means that the congregation and denomination has recognized gifts for ministry in those persons. All associate clergy who head ministries in churches (whether they are paid or not) should be ordained! Ordination will go a long way in signaling to congregations that the work of associate clergy is important. **It is no longer acceptable to only ordain paid clergy and clergy who pastor.**

(b) **The Bible is full of leadership partnerships:** Moses and Aaron, Mordecai and Esther, Paul and Silas, and even the Trinity. To do ministry that matters in the twenty-first century requires partnerships. Those in the second chair are often ignored. Setting aside a day or program in the life of the Church to say thank you to those persons shows good stewardship of the gifts God has placed in the Church.

(c) It would be good for senior pastors to read and then give as gifts to associate clergy the following books:

- Radcliffe, Robert J. Effective Ministry as an Associate Pastor: Making Beautiful Music as a Ministry Team.
- Bonem, Mike and Roger Patterson. Leading from the Second Chair: Serving Your Church, Fulfilling Your Role, and Realizing Your Dreams.
- Kellar, Marcel. Timothy, Stir Up Your Gift.

Notes

1. How to Celebrate National Employee Appreciation Day;

http://www.ehow.com/how_591754_celebrate-national-employee-appreciation-day.htm;#ixzz1GcodoNmy accessed 8 March 2011

2. Dickerson, Blake. *Pulpit & Pew Report: Clergy Pay Causing Problems for Churches.*

<http://www.dukenews.duke.edu/2003/02/clergysalary-kl-html> accessed 8 March 2011

3. Lillian Kwon. Largest Christian Groups Report Membership Decline.

<http://www.christianpost.com/news/largest-christian-groups-report-membership-decline-37180/> accessed 8 March 2011

4. Ibid.