

Sermon Psalm 8 II Corinthians 5:11-21 July 8, 2007
40th Anniversary of Ordination - Reflections

It is a good round number - 40. And it's a number that surprises me even as I say it this morning. It doesn't seem like its been that many years. Even after I looked at the display that my wife - and partner in this ministry and in my life for 44 years - Mary - put together in Heritage Hall - it doesn't seem like 40 years.

But I thank you for letting me, and helping me, do a little re-counting this morning. And I give special thanks to my sister Anne, and to the Choir for special efforts on this summer Sunday to help me recall this special time in my life.

Before I do a little remembering, will you please pray with me.

Brethren we have met to worship, and adore the Lord our God. Will you pray with all your power while I try to preach the word - Lord - may the words of my mouth and the thoughts of these your faithful and loving people, be acceptable to you and your good word to us this day in Christ. Amen.

A little more than two years ago we shared together in the experience of the Purpose Driven Church - and Rick Warren - in his book of that name - focused on the truth of the Christian life, and of Christian ministry. He said - It's not about me.

The Christian life, and Christian ministry, yours and mine, is first and last and always, about God. About God and God's work for us through Jesus Christ, our Lord and savior. The text for this morning, and, in truth, for my ministry, says it - We are ambassadors for Christ, God making God's appeal through us.

Even the numbers this morning tell this story. Yes - today marks the 40th anniversary of my ordination to the ministry of Word and Sacrament... and as I will share with you, sometimes also to the ministry of mucking out cow stalls and changing messy diapers.

But today, this week, represents 136 years in the ministry of this Church in this location... this Church - without which neither you nor I would be here. And in the bulletin you will note this week marks 59 years of marriage for Glen and Gladys Axelson - How significant is that number in this time in our society.

And we just celebrated Independence Day - 231 years of this nation under God - and we mark this as the year of the Lord 2007. And all these numbers help put my number in proper perspective. But today 40 is a special number for me. And I thank you for your call to me to Preach in this place now for almost 12 years, and for the chance to share a bit of what these 40 years have held for me.

Paul's words in II Corinthians have been the focus for me - both for my life in Christ and for my ministry. While ministry clearly involves many things that I do, that we do as a church, ministry is not a set of tasks. It is a calling, a vocation. Ministry is God's call to us to be ambassadors for Christ... to make God's appeal in Christ to all people to be God's people. To love God and to love each other with all our minds, hearts, souls and strength.

Ministry is this calling to a way of life - and we all share it. And - yes - Pastoral Ministry - the work you have called Marjorie and me to do - is a particular experience of ministry, of our call.

You've heard them before, but these words put it very well for me... I heard him call, come follow, that was all. My gold grew dim, I followed after him. Who would not follow if they heard him call.

I heard the call. Surely the first child of any professional or career person does struggle a bit with following his or her parent's footsteps. The chances of my being a ministry might have been a bit higher. But my Dad put it all in proper perspective when he said to me more than once - David - if you can happily do anything else - do it.

Consider ministry only if you are convinced it is the only thing you can do. And that was good counsel. Ministry, serving for Christ - is a call to us all that demands a new priority in our living. Christianity is a way of life. And in the Church, this is especially true of Pastoral ministry .

There is something about being a Pastor that is like being a shepherd. You are the Shepherd - and all the sheep never sleep at once. As a preacher's kid I knew that being a minister was not 9 to 5, and was more than Bible study, preaching, teaching, baptizing, marrying and burying.

I knew it was about late night calls, and bedside prayers, and graveside tears - And it was and is about budgets, and clean bathrooms, and city ordinances - and - About remembering Lincoln's quote - that you can't please all the people all the time. And remembering that the one to be pleased is God. And we please God by being ambassadors of God's love to God's people.

But above all else - Pastoral ministry is about people - God's people. Of course I do remember the places where I have been pastor, and the spaces where I've been privileged to work and to preach - and sometimes my life's watery itinerary looks like I really should be a Baptist - I was born in Chippewa Falls, lived in Sheboygan, Milwaukee, Grand Haven and Chicago, all on Lake Michigan - and served Churches in Newaygo on the Muskegon River, and in River Forest, Battle Creek, and now Orchard Lake.

When sometimes in a discussion people tell me I'm all wet - I consider it a complement.

But far more than the places or spaces where I have served in ministry, I remember most, faces, persons - to whom and with whom I have been blessed to serve. The sheep who have allowed me to be their shepherd. And I do confess that one of my joys has been that some of the sheep I have served liked to play golf - and you do have to go where the sheep go... though watching over those sheep has probably not been the hardest part of my work as a Pastor.

Still - in fact - the deepest sadnesses and joys, the toughest times and richest moments in my ministry have all been about the sheep, the people of God, with whom I've been privileged to share the journey of faith over 40 years.

As I looked back over 40 years I looked hard for some over arching dramatic theme. But I kept finding myself thinking about people more than events or causes or programs. The faces of people who have allowed me to be apart of their lives, a part of their faith journey. People who have taught me how true it is that God is Good - all the time.

I shared with you the special moment from my previous trip to South Africa. We are asked to pray with the people after they had seen the doctor and been treated. And when I asked one distinguished looking elderly zulu man if I could pray for him, he said in perfect english, young man - and that sounded like a blessing - young man - let me pray for you. And he did - and he reminded me that Pastor, and people - we are in this together with God as our guide.

I hope some of my prayers have meant as much to others as his did to me. And also the words that Eva Rich of this Church shared with me at the end of her struggle with cancer. Wanting to comfort her, she comforted me. Pastor she said, win or lose this fight, I win. With Christ - I win.

People - 40 years and people mark the most precious of my memories. People and their faith. A seminary classmate - suffering from Cerebral Palsey - Tim. Who became a chaplain to handicapped children at Illinois Children's hospital.

How he loved to parody that All State Commercial. He would hold out his palsied badly shaking hands - and say with a smile - Your in Good Hands - with God.

I can still smell the fresh bread that Roxy some how found a way to bake - and have ready for me when it was my turn to bring to her humble rural cottage where she was nearly bed bound the taped sermon. And she would deliver to me a lesson in real faith - up close and personal.

I remember the faith and courage of two families - the father of one hit the mother of the other in a blinding snow storm - and both died. And the community and the church gathered and celebrated life in Christ and taught me the meaning of the words of one of our confessions... Our hope is this.... In life and death we belong to God.

I remember the dairy farmer teaching me to milk cows and muck out stalls - and telling me why a good God allowed so much evil to exist - that we might be free to choose - free to love God - to trust and obey god - or not.

I remember being in charge of babysitting for the 11 p.m. Christmas Eve service at 4th. Church in Chicago - because I was the only staff member with little children, and Mary, Mary was singing in the choir. And in all my robed splendor at 10:55 was changing a messy diaper because of a late baby sitter.

But - What better reminder of the meaning of Christmas - God in flesh appearing... And - yes - all that it means to be a pastor.

It is about preaching and teaching, and counseling. About sacraments and sharing in moments of great joy and sorrow - It's also about tutoring programs for inner city kids, and protests against dominoes pizza for not delivering to a black youth group in Battle Creek, and prison visits to a man who sang in your choir and killed his wife.

It's about the privilege and excitement of being part of this church's first international mission trip to Mexico, and Reach Out Days to local missions;

It is the wonder of patient forgiving people who let you preach, even while they pray that no matter how good or bad you may be on a Sunday, God's Spirit will enable them to hear some good news to bless them into a new week.

And it is the challenge that this Pastor feels right now - to help you as God's people in this place, begin to consider what, with God's help, you must become as a Church to minister to the changing conditions and needs and wants of this community.

God willing, and God providing through us the resources needed, we will soon move into an enlarged much improved warmly welcoming facility for ministry. And this will call for and enable the creation of new programs, new opportunities for growing our faith deeper and reaching out more widely to our community.

And we will be challenged to remember that as vital as places and spaces are for ministry, ministry is sharing the good news. That's why we built a church in Xpujil Mexico and improved facilities in Kimbila and Ocosingo - spaces for ministry.

It's why My son Andy emailed from Togo Africa this week - where he is doing short term medical mission work - Andy shared that in that little country the muslims are building Mosque's in villages with wells - and winning converts...

Spaces are just the places - but they are places where the best of ministry can happen - if people's needs are being met... But we need most to remember the heart of our ministry - to be ambassadors for Christ, letting the good news of God's love loose in the world by the love we show and share with others.

Just a week ago I was outside on a very dark night - the electricity was out at the mission - and I saw in the star lit sky - the image of the Southern Cross - it's like the Big Dipper - a direction pointer. And I prayed that the God of creation, of the psalmists song - O Lord, Our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth..

I prayed that even as this God can guide our lives by northern and southern stars, that this God who has blessed me with God's call into ministry, and blessed me in very special ways with our call to this ministry with you here, I prayed that as you move into a new time in the life of this church, and so in your life of faith, even as I was able to help some first time South Africa visitors see the Southern Cross, so I will be able to help you see with confidence and excitement and new energy what God's call will be for you in the years to come.

I do not think the purpose of this Church will change very much - it will still be to care for Christ and for Christ's Church and for all Christ's people... But even as our Church space will be changed, so will the ways you are ambassadors for Christ change - Leadership will change, times and ways of worship will change to meet new needs, new forms of small groups will take shape, and the ways you serve the community will change

But the call, God's call to you in Christ, that will never change at all... to be Ambassadors for Christ ... You've heard him call - ringing in your ears, or a whisper in your heart - you've heard him call -that's why you're here. Come follow! - who would not answer if they heard him call. Thank you for helping me continue to hear and try to answer his call. Amen.

David W. Robertson, Pastor