

“A Look; A Word; A Touch”

**First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
February 9, 2020**

**New Testament Lesson: John 15:9-17
Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 43:1-3a**

I got a call Tuesday morning from the spiritual care coordinator at Blue Ridge Presbyterian Church. She asked me to visit two of their members at St. Luke’s on the Plaza. Their interim pastor, Ron Galvin, was having surgery that day and no one thought to arrange a backup.

Of course, I was happy to do it. And yet, I got the call as I was driving into Olathe to visit Charles Townley in the hospital, before going to St. Joseph’s Medical Center to pray with Freddie Pearson ahead of his surgery. With those two visits and my other work and meetings, I already had my day fully scheduled.

Now, truth be told, it only added about 50 minutes to my day, which of course is manageable. But I hadn’t been planning on it. So when I got the call, it took a moment to reorient myself to my new schedule.

Putting aside our plans to do the work of the Lord, particularly when it comes up unexpectedly, takes a certain amount of spiritual fortitude. We have to trust that we have what it takes to step up.

Pastors are used to stepping up as needed, and we’re happy and honored to do so. But nobody is born a pastor. Pastors come to know the deep spiritual well they draw from over time and with experience. We venture out in faith that we will be able to address whatever need we encounter, and each time, the Lord provides.

When I arrived at the hospital room to visit one of Ron’s church members, her grandson, sitting by her side, was quick to say she had just been asking about her church. The Lord provided that connection between her and the church at just the right time.

As I sat waiting for Freddie to arrive for surgery at St. Joseph’s, he came wheeling in and said, “I knew you’d find the place.” Yes, Freddie, the Lord led me here. And after visiting Charles Townley, I was walking across the parking lot when I heard a voice from the hospital entrance calling, “Hey.”

I thought, “Did I leave something behind?” Turns out, his daughter Peggy caught a glimpse of me, and she was shocked that I would drive that far in the sleet and snow to see her dad. Yes, Peggy, Jesus carried me safely there.

The point is, we don’t do ministry under our own power or at our own initiative. We do ministry – and when I say “we” I mean you, and you, and you, and everyone here – we do ministry in response to Jesus’ call and in the strength of the Lord. And that type of ministry takes a certain amount of spiritual fortitude. So it’s fitting, as we prepare to ordain, install and commission brothers and sisters in ministry, that we look at the source of our strength and call.

Jesus, in today’s New Testament lesson, points to the source of our strength and call for ministry, whether that’s as a church officer, a committee member, church or community volunteer, member of a household, or a Scout pack or however it is that you are called to serve in the Lord’s name.

Preparing us to serve in his name, Jesus says to us, “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you....” And then he gives us this command: “Abide in my love.” Abiding in the love of Jesus is the source of our strength and call for ministry. Here, Jesus uses the words “love” and “abide” three times – abide meaning to live or remain in Jesus’ love.

Jesus is in the upper room with his disciples the night before his arrest and he wants to be sure that after he’s gone, his followers know they can – and must – remain connected to him, through their love for one another. “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love,” says Jesus. ... This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”

As much as we might dislike the word “commandment” when it’s directed at us – who wants to be told what to do – as much as we may not like that, actually, being commanded to love one another doesn’t sound too bad, until Jesus completes the sentence by saying, “... as I have loved you.”

To be sure we get the point, Jesus goes on to say, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” – to set aside your plans to do the work of the Lord. And then, to really be sure we get it, Jesus adds, “You are my friends if you do what I command you.”

As followers of Christ, we are all called to do the work of the Lord. But not everybody approaches it the same way. Some feel weary and overburdened when called to serve. Others feel joyous and full of energy.

And we've all felt both ways at one time or another – joyous one day, overburdened the next. What is it that changes drudgery to joy? Well, when we feel weary and overburdened it's because we've lost touch with the Lord. We've failed to keep Jesus by our side. And that has us come from a place of scarcity and fear, rather than abundance and love?

Take for example the women in counseling who finally blurted out: "All I want from my husband is not that much more than my dog wants from him. When my husband comes home, our dog barks and runs to him, waiting for three things to happen: first, a kind look; second, a friendly word; and third, a loving touch." "A look, a word, a touch; that's all I really want in this relationship."

Those who serve with joy and energy do so because they have that type of a relationship with the Lord – a kind look, which tells them they are loved; a friendly word, Jesus calling them by name; a loving touch, the Holy Spirit guiding them along the way. A look, a word, and a touch – love, friendship, and guidance. That's all we really need from the Lord to experience that inner sense of joy in all we do. So, how do we get that?

I mean, God did not send Jesus into the world to overburden us in ministry. God sent Jesus that we might know the joy of ministry. "I have said these things to you," says Jesus, "so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete." Whenever you're not experience joy in serving the Lord, that's the time to reflect on the life of Jesus, dig into God's word, pray for the Spirit to guide you.

Those who serve the Lord can do so in one of two ways – joyously or reluctantly, as a friend of the Lord's or feeling enslaved in drudgery. Jesus is looking for friends in ministry not slaves in drudgery. He says so, right here. "I do not call you servants any longer," "because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father."

We have all we need to be joyous and not reluctant in answering the call to serve. We have a kind look from the Lord, which tells us we are loved; we have a friendly word from Jesus, which tells us we are known and accepted; and we have the loving touch of the Holy Spirit, guiding us ever closer to God.

A look, a word, and a touch – love, friendship, and guidance. If you're not feeling it, check to see if you're really abiding in Christ, really studying God's word, really open to the leading of Holy Spirit. Or are you too attached to worldly things, too busy to open a Bible apart from worship, too set in your ways to follow the Spirit's leading. That's what leads to drudgery – too much worldly stuff and not enough spiritual fortitude, spiritual nurture and care for oneself.

We were not called to a life of drudgery. We are called to a life of ministry. Jesus says, “You did not choose me but I chose you.” In other words, the world as we know it doesn’t really want what Jesus has to offer – it doesn’t choose Jesus; the world rejects Jesus. And still, Jesus chooses us, and he sends us into the world in ministry. “I appointed you,” says Jesus, “to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name.”

As long as we continue to show up ready to do the work of the Lord, the world will never get the last word. Through us – through your simple, faithful acts of ministry – God will transform this world into his joyous and loving kingdom. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Let us pray:

Gracious God, we thank you for the unconditional love we receive from you, demonstrated most vividly in Jesus' willingness to call us friends, and then lay down his life for us.

For many, we experience a human manifestation of the Lord through a kind look, a friendly word, a loving touch. We thank you for those who embody your Spirit, perform acts of kindness, and offer unconditional love.

We thank you for those who taught us the faith and shared with us the stories of Jesus. We thank you for the ways you mold our character and instill in us godly values.

We ask you to bless all the servant leaders among us, all our disciples here, and to grant them strength and peace.

We ask your strength and peace also for those dealing with medical conditions and for all those we know who are in need of the Lord’s comfort and care.

We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray together, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**