

WAITING ON TABLES AND GETTING STONED
A SERMON PREACHED AT FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH GREENWICH
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THE LESSON FOR THE DAY--ACTS 6:1-12, 7:54-60

My friend saw my sermon title on the sign and said, "Are you going to preach about college days?" I said, "College days?" He got all nostalgic and said, "Ah, Princeton, 1974, waiting on tables at The Annex and getting stoned. Those were the days!"

As you've probably guessed from the Scripture lessons this morning, I'm not going to preach about college in the 70's, but about officers in the church. Ordained offices in the Christian Church begin with waiting on tables, and they end with getting stoned. Let me look with you at this text from Acts which tells us about the earliest officers in the Christian Church.

The first thing to notice about this passage is that waiting on tables is the unmet need which precipitated the formation of the offices of elder and deacon in the Christian Church. It's 31, 32 A.D. Jesus has been gone a few scant months. The Church is exploding with new converts, exponentially exceeding the most optimistic projections of its prescient long-range planners. You think Judy Kelly does a good job rounding up new members for this church? The Christian Church enlisted 3000 in the first day of its existence.

For this institution with new church developments in every major city of the Roman empire, there are only 12 pastors. Spiritual authority in the earliest church was conferred only upon those who had actually seen Jesus, touched him, spoke to him, watched him die

on that skull-shaped heap of rocks called Golgotha, and seen him again after everybody thought they'd sealed him away for good behind a two-ton slab of stone. Twelve pastors only.

Most of the new *members* are from the lower strata of Roman society-- servants, slaves, carpenters, fishermen, that sort of thing, the kind of people who live hand-to-mouth day in and day out. There are many poor. One day Peter finds himself slinging hash for the impoverished new Christians in a place like Shelter for the Homeless, worrying the whole time he's there about how he's ever going to find time to write that sermon he's got to give the next morning, wipes a grease spot off of his apostolic robes, and wonders why on earth someone who actually saw the risen Jesus with his own eyes has to be busy with such pedestrian tasks as washing dishes. "I gotta get me some help," he says. "I'm supposed to be occupying my time with cerebral tasks like thinking erudite homiletic thoughts."

And so he consults with James and John and the other apostles and they decide that the new Christians ought to elect from among their number some officers to help run the church. We're not quite sure what that office was like in those earliest days. This passage from Acts mentions neither the word 'elder' nor the word 'deacon,' but whatever the office was called and whatever they were supposed to do, it seems to have been the precursor to our contemporary church offices of elder and deacon and to contain responsibilities from

each of them. They cared for the widows, like the deacons, but they were also spiritual leaders, like the elders. Stephen seems to have been as eloquent a preacher as Peter himself.

Perhaps originally there was just the one ordained office, an organism that later branched off into two distinct species by natural selection. Some of these officers excelled at the ministry of compassion; they evolved into deacons. Others were skilled at leadership; they evolved into elders, administrators.

So the first thing to notice is that the government of the church's ministry is a shared endeavor. Very early in its history the Church decided that the ministry should never be reserved just for those who saw the Risen Christ with their own eyes. The ministry of the church does not belong to a select few who spent three years at seminary thinking lofty and abstract thoughts about God and Schleiermacher. The Church's ministry belongs to the people themselves--it is partly their responsibility to see that the Christ-like life is preached and lived in the world.

The way Luther talked about it was to say that our ministry is a priesthood of all believers. It is not really true that Presbyterians don't have priests. In reality they have a lot more priests than the Roman Catholics do because all of us are priests. In the Presbyterian Church (USA) there are something like 2.5 million priests, and the ministry belongs to us all. Where do you think the English word 'priest' comes from? It's a contraction of the Greek word 'presbyter,' which means 'elder.' It was Calvin in the sixteenth century who revived the ancient office of presbyter or elder after a long dormancy during the hegemony of Rome,

when ordained office was reserved for a sanctified few called 'priests', so we normally think that the office of priest is older and more venerable, but actually the original office was called presbyter. The office we now call 'priest' was actually the descendent of the office of 'presbyter,' not the other way round. We could talk about the presbyterhood of all believers.

So that's the first thing to notice: church leadership is shared, universal even. And the second thing to notice is that the offices of Presbyterian elder and deacon begin with feeding the poor and caring for the lonely. The offices of Presbyterian elder and deacon are largely a ministry of compassion and entirely a ministry of service. These offices are structured along the Christ-like pattern, the Christ who came to serve and not to be served, the Christ who on the night before he died took a towel and a basin full of water and began scraping the dust from between the toes of a bunch of grimy fishermen. The offices of elder and deacon begin with waiting on tables--taking orders, filling water glasses, clearing dishes, taking guff from the customers, assessing the needs of the faithful and meeting them. You are to be the servants of the people of God. Here you thought election to office was a mark of prestige and distinction and honor and now you find out that the beginning of it is waiting on tables and taking orders. Are you sure you want to do this? It's too late now. You've been ordained--ordained to the Christ-like pattern, set apart for a life of service.

The third thing to notice is the kind of people the apostles choose to help them with their task, the kind of people ordained to Christian service in the life of the Church. They're all Greeks. They're all Greek-speaking Jews who

sometimes confuse the Jerusalem Temple with the Athens Parthenon. They aren't from the inner circle of Galilean and Judean Christians who comprise the charter members of the Christian Church. They're outsiders and newcomers. They are the newest members of the Christian Church. The twelve Apostles who saw the risen Christ with their own eyes refuse to perpetuate the Jewish hegemony which has prevailed until now. They refuse to continue electing a self-perpetuating board of inner-circle cronies and to grasp the authority and responsibility eternally to themselves.

I think there is a lesson here for the contemporary Church. That's the way we do things at the First Presbyterian Church of Greenwich. Like the earliest disciples we have decided to entrust our leadership to the uninitiated, the untried, and the untested. I hope you will notice that this congregation has decided not to vest all of its leadership perpetually with a few venerable members who have been here since Moses came down the mountain with the Ten Commandments. Most of them don't know who John Bates was and they certainly never met him. They don't remember when the sanctuary faced the other direction. Some of them never even saw the building we tore down in 2005. They weren't the ones who had the chance thirty years ago to purchase all the property between here and the municipal lot for \$60,000 or whatever it was, thank God. Of course, they'll be saying the same thing about us in thirty years too. "They could have had the whole thing for \$4 million and the old tight-wad Scots turned them down," is what they'll say.

I think I've shared with you before what the very wise Church Leadership Guru Lyle Schaller says that at least 25% of the leadership of a church must be new members. He

says that any church in which more than 75% of the officers have been members of the church for longer than five years has decided to die. The Church of the Apostles decided to live, and this church too. The Church of the Apostles knew that you need new leaders to meet new challenges. You need new leaders for new ideas. The Church of the Apostles knew that "if you always do what you've always done, you'll always have what you've already got," to quote a wise sage from one of the congregations where I served.

And the last thing to notice about this passage is that if waiting on tables is the beginning of the offices of elder and deacon, getting stoned is the end of it. And here you thought it was an such an honor to be a Presbyterian deacon or elder. If the Church is faithful in proclaiming Jesus Christ to the world, the world will respond with vengeance. The world does not want Christ's new vision of humanity challenging its habitual patterns of being and starts throwing rocks at the leadership. One of the first seven elders in the history of the Church got killed for telling the world that he saw the heavens opened and Jesus Christ standing at the right hand of God. Stephen told the world he had a more accurate vision of divinity than they had, and it really ticked them off.

Now, it's awfully hard to get stoned in our modern world, at least the way Stephen got stoned. To our eternal credit, we don't go around much anymore stamping out alternative religious sensibilities. But I wonder, I wonder, if this leadership will do anything--anything at all--that will make the world grind its teeth at us the way Luke says the authorities ground their teeth at Stephen. If the world doesn't get ticked off at the Church once in a while, what's the point? Why don't we just be

the Rotary Club? They do a lot of good in the world and they fit right in.

But of course our mission is different from that. Will we do anything—anything at all—that will make them grind their teeth? Will we feed the hungry, challenge inequity, speak truth to power, preach good news to the poor and recovery of sight to the blind? Will we become intolerant of injustice and prejudice, lend voice to the disenfranchised, ask the rich to feed the poor, and the strong to support the weak?

Do you remember Stephen Jay Gould? He was the Harvard paleontologist who wrote books like *The Structure of Evolutionary Theory*, *Hen's Teeth and Horse's Toes*, *The Flamingo's Smile*, *Rock of Ages*. He was born in Queens and graduated from Jamaica High School and Columbia University. His father took him to the American Museum of Natural History when he was five, and right then he decided to be a paleontologist when the Tyrannosaurus Rex scared the wits out of him. He finally surrendered to cancer about five years ago, at the age of 60, with so much more to discover and think and write and learn.

He was first struck gravely ill twenty years before that in 1982. Through the years, then, he learned to live with brokenness. He said he always loved the motto of the Paleontological Society. Their tools, of course, are hammers, and their specimens are rocks. The motto is *Frango ut patefaciam*—I break in order to reveal.¹ They could have put that motto on Christ's cross. *Frango ut patefaciam*—I break in order to reveal.¹

No one gets stoned anymore, thank the good Lord. No one gets rocks thrown at them. No one gets broken in quite that way. We live in this wonderful country with the wisest and strongest Constitution the world has ever seen. Freedom of religion and freedom of speech are listed first in the Bill of Rights. But maybe getting stoned means breaking open to reveal, breaking open a new way of doing things, breaking our allegiance to a monied and privileged class, breaking the rules, speaking hard truths to entrenched powers. "I break in order to reveal."

The offices of Presbyterian elder and deacon assume the Christ-like pattern. It begins with waiting on tables and washing the feet of the fishermen, and it ends with confronting the world's power. Compassion and courage. The kind deacon and the brave elder. Be faithful. Be faithful, and we will all see the heavens opened and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

¹Carol Kaesuk Yoon, "Stephen Jay Gould, 60, Is Dead; Enlivened Evolutionary Theory," *The New York Times*, May 21, 2002.