

“Equipped”
Ephesians 4:1-16
07.25.21

Introduction

In a previous appointment, the back of the bulletin listed all of the staff at our church. At the top it named the senior pastor, then the associate pastor, youth pastor, children’s minister, and minister of music. Then at the bottom was the title, “ministers,” and across from it, it said, “Everyone.” The idea of calling the entire congregation “ministers” was rooted in the United Methodist belief that every baptized person is a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ.¹

This is kind of a foreign concept to most of us. To illustrate, I’d like to share a few conversations that I have had recently with people in the church (with their permission, of course).

Shelia Raddochio is currently taking classes through our conference to become a certified lay minister. Shelia and I are meeting regularly to talk about it, and we are praying and discerning together what that will look like for her here at St. Andrew.

She shared with me that during her first class the teacher began by saying, “Every Christian is a minister.” Shelia shared that this idea has revolutionized her understanding of what it means to be called by God. As of right now, Shelia has no plans to go to seminary and pursue ordination, but she is convinced, and I am convinced, that God is calling her to be a minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and she is following that call.

Another example has to do with when I was preparing to leave for vacation a few weeks ago. I shared in the midweek update that in case of an emergency, Melanie Ogu could be contacted for “ministerial support.” When I showed it to Melanie she thought that it sounded too high and lofty for the kind of things that she does, but it created an opportunity for us to talk about how we want every person at St. Andrew to live with the belief and conviction that they are called by God to be a minister of Jesus Christ.

Circuit Riders

The name *Circuit Riders* was given to the earliest American Methodist preachers. They literally rode horseback from one town to the next preaching the gospel, training and equipping lay people to serve, and administering the sacraments at local congregations. They would stay in one place for a few days and then they would move on to another town.

¹ One of the major turning points of the Protestant Reformation was the belief in the “priesthood of every believer,” based on a passage in the book of Hebrews. Martin Luther, along with other Protestants believed that all Christians had access to God for prayer and the forgiveness of sins and did not need to go through a priest.

In their absence, lay people would preach, teach, disciple new believers, organize mission and outreach in their community and exercise congregational care for those who were sick and troubled. It might be weeks, or maybe even months, before their pastor would return. And when he returned (all Methodist ministers were men in those days), he would preach, teach, and equip lay people to do the work of the ministry.

The demographics began to change in America with the development of large urban areas (as well as the suburbs). Station churches replaced circuits, and station pastors replaced circuit riders. This new model for ministry conditioned lay people to see their pastor as a “professional Christian”—almost like a chaplain whose main responsibility was to care for the needs of the congregation. Therefore, the majority of lay people were no longer coming to church to be equipped for the work of ministry, but to receive spiritual services from their pastor and eventually the church staff.

I am convinced that we are experiencing a paradigm shift. Whether we realize it or like it, things are changing in church culture on a large scale, and I am convinced that the only way the organized church is going to survive is if we return to our roots and embrace the model for ministry that was given to us by our founder, John Wesley.

Digging Deeper

At the beginning of our series, I shared with you that the letter to the Ephesians is divided in half. In the first half (chapters 1-3), Paul explains the mechanics of salvation (i.e., everything that God has done for us in Christ). In the second half (chapters 4-6), Paul explains how we should live in response to everything that God has done for us in Christ.

He says, “Therefore...I beg you to walk worthily of the calling of which you have been called.” Here Paul is claiming that every Christian is called by God and the proper response is to “walk worthily” of that calling.

He goes on to say that we have one faith, one Lord, and one baptism, but many gifts, and then he names several. Among them he names “Pastor.” In fact, this is the passage that helps me define what it means to be a pastor.

Paul says that a pastor is called by God to teach and to “equip the saints for the work of the ministry.” Therefore, above all else, being a pastor means being one who teaches Scripture and Christian tradition and helps others discover and employ their gifts so that we might work together to collectively be the body of Christ.

The Example of Jesus

This is also the model that Jesus left for us. Jesus gathered twelve disciples who were completely different from one another. One was a tax collector, four were fishermen, and one was a zealot (i.e., military).

Jesus invited these men to join him in his ministry as he traveled throughout northern Israel healing the sick, exorcising demons, and proclaiming the kingdom of God. The disciples shadowed Jesus and learned from him, and then eventually Jesus sent the disciples to go out and do the work of ministry on their own. Jesus equipped them and sent them.

Jesus did not tell them that it would be easy, and he did not even expect for things to go smoothly. In fact, Jesus tells the disciples that he is sending them out like sheep among wolves (Matt. 10:16)

Jesus knows that the disciples are going to mess up and fall on their faces, but he is also prepared to receive them when they return. Jesus knows that they will continue to need his leadership and guidance but in a new and different way. He didn't try to hold them back or micromanage them—he let them use their gifts and he sent them out knowing that they would continue to grow as ministers of the gospel.

Small Group Ministry

Our small group ministry has been growing over the last year and those who are participating have grown in their relationships with one another and have grown in their faith. But now they are ready to step out into the community to do outreach. In other words, over the last year they have been equipped to do the work of ministry and now they are ready to put it into practice.

In a sense, I'm going to become a circuit riding preaching. But instead of getting on a horse and going from town to town, I am going to spend time with each of groups to help them discern what God is calling them to do and help them discern how they can use their gifts for the sake of the kingdom.

In the spring, Melanie offered a study based on a book called *Toxic Charity*, and it was incredibly eye-opening, to say the least. If you haven't read it, I recommend that you do. As our small groups expressed a desire to engage our community, *Toxic Charity* helped us create the criteria for how we can most effectively do outreach, and so this is what we are urging each of our groups to do:

- Get outside of the walls of our church. We need to have a presence in the community.
- It needs to be low-to-no budget.
- The primary goal is not to meet a felt need but to build a relationship over a long period of time with the same group of people.

- The ultimate objective, which is counterintuitive to everything we've been taught, is not to extend an invitation to Sunday morning worship. Instead, our objective is to take the church to our community (Jesus sent his disciples to participate in the kingdom of God and invite others to join them in the movement). But when we shine our light as Jesus taught us too, it is going to be contagious, and people are going to want to be a part of this movement.

On Wednesday of this past week, one of our small groups went to the Villager Apartments here in town and had a cookout. I got to drop by for a few minutes, and it was great. Food always seems to bring people together, doesn't it?

We sat and ate with the residents, learned their names, and we all took turns sharing our stories. This particular small group went there because they prayed about it and they felt like that is what God is calling them to do. Each month they will return to build relationships and share God's love one way or another with the residents, and we have eight other groups that are in the prayer and discernment stages as they consider how God is going to use them.

Imagine the impact we can make in our community as our groups adopt youth league sports teams and join trivia night at the local pizza place. Imagine all the different points of contact we will make, the relationships we will build, and the people who will want to be a part of our movement.

Invitation

Whether you realize it or not, God is calling you to be a minister of Jesus Christ. God has given you gifts to compliment the gifts of other people in our church so that we can work together as the hands and feet of Christ in our community. Right now, I believe the primary mechanism that God is calling us to use in order to execute the mission of our church is our small group ministry. It's not perfect. It is a work in progress. But it is exciting to see people responding to their calling, and it is exciting to watch God is using small groups to transform St. Andrew.

If you're not already participating in a small group, I hope you will contact me or Melanie and we'd love to sit down with you, answer your questions, and help you get plugged in. We are here to help equip you for ministry so that you might faithfully respond to God's calling.

Reference Tools

Lupton, Robert. *Toxic Charity*. 2012. New York: Harper Collins.

Norwood, Fredrick. *The Story of American Methodism*. 1974. Nashville: Abingdon Press.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How do you feel about the idea that you are a minister of Jesus Christ?
2. What are your impressions of circuits vs. station churches? What strengths and weaknesses do you see in these two different models of ministry?
3. How does Jesus' example of sending the disciples and Paul's teaching in Ephesians 4:1-16 impact your understanding of what it means to be a disciple and what it looks like for the church to focus on equipping saints for the work of ministry?
4. What is God calling you/us to do?
5. How have you witnessed God's grace recently?
6. How can we pray for you?