

Jeshurun¹,

As I write to you on the eve of your ordination, I begin with apologies that, for the service, I will not be present in body, but rest assured I will be present in spirit. I send this letter as an act of celebration and encouragement for your heart, even though your head knows the hurdles which lie before you as you live *this life* as a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ. I therefore “beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you are called” (Ephesians 4:1, NKJV).

I also want to thank you for the invitation to impart to you some “wisdom regarding ministry.” I must say, your impression of me and what I have done throughout the years is much more gracious than I deserve. Therefore, may what follows simply be the musings of a deckhand on a vessel that has traversed the seas on which you now embark, although underway with different sails, yet guided by the same Captain – Christ Jesus our Lord.

Let me begin by urging you to discover a theology “for” ministry which will serve as a star by which to navigate. The scriptures are replete with examples. In some instances, the lessons we learn from these personal experiences teach us what to do, and in other instances, what not to do. So, to be true to your calling as a minister of the gospel, judge each example by the standard of Jesus, and allow his ministry to ultimately be your guide.

The words of Matthew’s Gospel have served me well in keeping my mind on the higher calling (Philippians 3:14, KJV), where “Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people” (Matthew 4:23, NRSV). In much the same way, at the end of the Gospel, Jesus entrusts his ministry to the eleven (and to us who follow-after), “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 19-20, NRSV).

When I first stepped aboard the ship of the church as pulpiteer², the seas appeared calm, and the winds blew fair. Preaching, teaching, and healing seemed so simple and straightforward. Ministry was viewed as a societal good and ministers, even if not always agreed with, were trusted. Clouds would arise on the horizon, of course, but with faith and hope and love it was believed the church (and its ministers) could weather any disturbance. Now, occasional squalls have morphed into a full-fledged storm, and the prophets among us see rough sailing ahead as the morning light glows red (Matthew 16:3, NRSV).³

¹ Although used here as a proper name, *y^ošurûn* may also be understood as a term of endearment for Israel, or the people of God in general, as in “Beloved” (e.g. Isaiah 44:2).

² I am thinking here of the pulpit on a ship from whence the occupant would call to the crew instructions intended to avoid the vessel’s destruction and to keep focused on the mission at hand.

³ See the works by Phyllis Tickle (*The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why*. Baker Books, 2008) and Neil Howe (*The Fourth Turning is Here: What the Seasons of History Tell Us About How and When This Crisis Will End*. Simon & Schuster, 2023).

Fear and trepidation have seized the souls of those we have been called to serve. Not knowing to whom to give allegiance, those in these days do what is right in their own eyes (Judges 17:6) while, at the same time, they clamor for a king or queen to lead them (1 Samuel 8:5). They are like sheep without a shepherd who have allowed their rage toward the “other” to drive them to tribalism and nativism (Isaiah 13:14).

They prostrate themselves before political icons and acquiesce toward alternative altars which only give them more of what they want; me, my, and mine, wrongly believing “they” will fill the longing of their hearts. There are even those among us who corrupt the calling of God to the point of stuffing their own pockets and uplifting their own egos, selling their birthright for a mess of pottage (Genesis 25:29-34). They crave a theology of authority while neglecting the way, the truth, and the life that is the gracious gift in front of them (John 14:6).

Lest I give the impression you and I are not a part of the fearful and wayward, may I remind us both, as ministers, we are seduced to succumb to the same temptations our Lord endured as he was in the wilderness; the temptations to accept a theology of ministry where the end justifies the means (Matthew 4:1-11, NRSV). This way is not the Jesus way, nor should it be our way, to do ministry and to be a minister.⁴

The picture I have painted seems bleak, and the journey ahead seems daunting. Perhaps I have moved you to distress your calling and your ordination to the point you now wish to turn your back on them both. But if I know you, and I believe I do, to reverse course now would not satisfy your quest to follow God’s call (Isaiah 6:1-8), nor assuage your “fire in the bones” to proclaim Christ’s gospel (Jeremiah 20:9), nor alleviate your own fear and trepidation.

For even as Jesus went about his ministry and looked upon the crowds and “...had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matthew 9:36, NRSV), so too he looks upon those of us who have put our hands to the plow and have not looked back (Luke 9:62), for the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few” (Matthew 9:37, NRSV). We are who we are, and we do what we do, by grace alone.

Come to think of it, we may need a more robust ministerial grace theology. Not a theology “about” grace, but a theology “of” grace, the lived and living grace which we find in the person of Christ. The embodied grace we read of in 2 Corinthians 5:16-21 where we are reconciled to God (*katallagete*) and we are given the “ministry of reconciliation.”⁵ And, amidst much fear and trepidation, to be a non-anxious presence.⁶

To be sure, as a minister, and in ministry, do not be afraid to fail – and acknowledge the failure. Be humble enough to say, “I messed up” and don’t be embarrassed to ask for forgiveness. As a pastor once said when a mistake was made, “It’s an error of the head and not the heart.” The

⁴ Peterson, Eugene H. *The Jesus Way: A Conversation on the Ways that Jesus is the Way*. Eerdmans, 2007.

⁵ Will Campbell, the “bootleg Baptist preacher,” had a great deal to say about this.

⁶ Friedman, Edwin. *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*. Guilford Press, 1985.

scriptures are brimming with stories of failure, and the ways God does not waste anything, even humanities most terrible mistakes.

But what the scriptures do not appear to attend to, in the same way they do not include a thorough going theodicy, is a theology of disappointment. On this I have no word of my own, nor a word from the Lord. I only have experiences that have shaped me in the past and shape me still. And I have this, not to satisfy, but to suffice, “My grace is sufficient for you...” (2 Corinthians 12:9, NRSV).

I pray this is not the last opportunity we will have to correspond. For I look forward to hearing of where your journey with God and God’s people will take you. If, in any small way, I have shared with you something that may be of benefit to you and your ministry, may God be praised! But please know, you and your ministry are already of benefit to me, as we serve as co-laborers in the field of Christ’s kingdom, working together to develop sustainable ecclesia-culture in the days that are to come (1 Corinthians 3:9).

As on a farm there are practices which keep life healthy and vibrant, so too in the life of the church (prayer, scripture reading, worship, service, the Lord’s Supper, the washing of feet), and in your life as a minister (“The life of the pastor completes itself in reading, meditation, prayer, and struggle.”)⁷ Do not neglect such things, but if you do, do not fret. For as our Lord reminds us, “The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how” (Mark 4:26, NRSV).

Finally, Jeshurun, “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (Philippians 4:8). Now “Go, stand in the temple and tell the people the whole message about *this life*” (Acts 5:20, NRSV).

Shalom,
John

⁷ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Spiritual Care*, 68.