

“Faithful and Fruitful”

Pastor Dave Carlson
First Presbyterian Church
January 24, 2016

New Testament Lesson: Luke 4:14-21

Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 23

In the magazine HarperBusiness, Roger Dow and Susan Cook tell about one high-end Italian restaurant in Washington, D.C., that made headlines: “Man Thrown Out for Ordering Risotto.”¹ A patron who loved risotto saw it on the menu as an entree, but asked for a small portion as an appetizer. The waiter went back to check with the chef, who owned the establishment. He returned shortly (saying), “I’m sorry, we do not serve risotto as an appetizer.” “Fine, I’ll pay the whole entree price, but please bring it first as my appetizer.” “I’m afraid you don’t understand, sir. We do not serve risotto as an appetizer.” “This is crazy! Said the man, I just want risotto!” The chef came out of the kitchen. “Risotto is not meant to be an appetizer,” he said coldly. “It must be a main course. And you, sir, must leave my restaurant.” The incredulous patron refused to budge. The police were called in, and the unfortunate fellow was escorted from the premises for ordering risotto as an appetizer.

People these days want what they want when they want it. It’s all about individual choice and tailoring things to meet the desire and needs of “me.” Well, not really me. But of every single person who shows any interest in what’s being offered.

For churches, this trend has given rise to the “big box church” with its fully-equipped praise band, hipster preacher and ministry staff, and a menu of programs to meet every possible interest.

There’s nothing wrong with that, as long as Christ is at the center of all that’s offered, as long as people are led deeper in the faith, as long as the community holds together as the body of Christ making meaningful connections with one another, as long as that type of church is a true expression of that particular congregation and the community it serves.

Pursuing growth for the sake of growth may get you bigger – may – but growing together in Christian service while going deeper in the faith will attract new people – it will. That’s something both the successful big-box churches and our historic church here have in common – serving and learning (stretching and growing).

And it’s time for us to stretch and grow a bit more – in our faith, in our ministries, and in our ways of organizing ourselves.

¹ Roger Dow & Susan Cook, Turned On [New York: HarperBusiness, 1996], 104-5.)

As we prepare to enter into a season of reflecting and visioning and planning and changing, it's a good time to look to Christ for a few basics in how to approach ministry. Jesus turned a new corner in his life when he first took on the job of ministry. And as he did this, he grounded himself in the basics.

Jesus, in today's New Testament reading, shows us the basics of engaging in a vital and fruitful ministry, things that we can keep in mind as we take on new ways of doing ministry and being the church.

"(Jesus) stood up to read," remembers Luke, "and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him." Here, Jesus is handed one of the most popular scrolls of scripture in his day. Engaging popular culture in our approach to ministry is not a bad thing. It's good.

Step 1 is being open to **using what God puts in front of you**. That's a great way to share the gospel and grow the Kingdom of God.

Next, Luke tells us, Jesus "unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written" Well, let's stop there before we look at what was written. Notice that Jesus made a decision about the scripture he would read – "he unrolled the scroll and found the place...." How do you suppose he decided what passage to read that day? Prayer. Don't you suppose Jesus prayed about what to say and do in the synagogue on the first day of his ministry in Galilee?!? Of course he did.

And so should we – so should you and I. We should pray before we even open our mouths and speak of ministry. That's a critical step in having a faithful and fruitful life – praying for the words to say and the actions to take, in every situation.

Step 2 is **praying for God's guidance** and our own faithful response.

Steps 3 through 5 actually support us in taking Steps 1 and 2. Before we can pray about and use what God provides to us for ministry, we each have to examine ourselves for what gifts and talents we have.

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," says Jesus. Here, Jesus does a little soul-searching before qualifying himself as someone living in the Spirit. Jesus knew himself to be someone able to resist any worldly temptation and to overcome any human limitation, and he attributed that to the Spirit of God being upon him.

Step 3 is to ask yourself **how God has equipped you** for ministry – whether through a generous heart; a compassionate, listening ear; a keen mind; a vision for ministry; the legs to stand up under pressure; a sense of integrity that brings trust and partnership; the gift of healing; or maybe just a rock-solid faith used to encourage and strengthen others. Everyone has a spiritual gifts worth sharing. Step 3 is knowing what yours are.

One way we discover our spiritual gifts is by seeking the insights and wisdom of others, someone you can get some feedback from about what your gift for ministry might be.

It's like the man who goes to the wise rabbi and asks, "How did you become such a wise man?" The rabbi responds, "Study and hard work." The man asks, "What made you study and work so hard?" to which the rabbi responds, "A lot of experience." The man then asks, "How did you get a lot of experience?" The rabbi responds, "I have good judgment." The man then asks, "How did you get good judgment?" The rabbi replies, "A lot of bad experiences."

We are all being shaped for ministry in one way or another. If you can't see that for yourself – how God is shaping you for ministry – ask someone you know and respect what he or she sees in you as your God-given gifts. Trust me, if you pray about it and engage with others about it, God will show you your God-given gifts for ministry.

And that brings us to Steps 4 and 5. Steps 4 and 5 **are knowing who gave you your spiritual gifts (God) and how to use them (to God's good purpose)**. God is the how and why of ministry.

In contemplating his own ministry, Jesus recognizes that he has received the Spirit of the Lord only through God and for God's good purpose. "He has anointed me," says Jesus, "to bring good news to the poor." Jesus never forgot that throughout his three short years of earthly ministry. And look what he accomplished. Likewise, there is no telling what we can accomplish as long as we never forget that **God is the sources of our ministry and the reason we serve**.

And that brings us to Steps 6, 7 and 8. These last three steps on the pathway toward a faithful and fruitful life have to do with being in ministry – which as Christians, we all are.

Each of us is called to be a minister to and alongside one another and our neighbors in the world, even and especially the stranger among us. As Jesus anticipated heading out in ministry to and with his brothers and sisters in the world, he clearly stated his purpose and then got about the business of fulfilling it. He said of God, "He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Step 6 is actually **stepping forward when you are called** into ministry, setting out in service to God and neighbor (neighbor being whoever is standing before you at the time).

And Step 7 is **never forgetting why you're doing it** – "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Ministry is never about us and our desires – it's always about God's purpose. **It's about God; not you or me.**

We can never expect to be successful as Christians – or as a church – unless everything we do and how we do it points back to God, and not ourselves. And finally, the eighth step. This is the shortest but hardest step of all. Luke tells us that after he spoke, "(Jesus) rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant,

and sat down.” **Jesus left the outcome to God.** Jesus allowed the people to respond, however the people might respond.

Jesus does not force his will upon the world, but rather, he invites the world to participate with him in bringing about God’s will.

And that, my friends, is the hardest part of ministry – allowing people to either accept it or reject it, and then trusting God to turn it all – even rejection – to God’s good purpose. There you have it.

Eight steps to a faithful and fruitful life of ministry. They’re printed on a bookmark the ushers have for you as you leave today. You don’t have to remember each and every one of these aspects of faithful and fruitful ministry. Just look at them, look at yourself, and then take that next step – wherever you are, and wherever it might lead. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

Wise and loving God, you graciously provide to your church all the gifts we need to serve you, and you give us your Spirit to empower our use of these gifts.

Yet, time and again, we try to do things in our own power, in our own way, and in our own time, and, of course, the inevitable happens.

We become frustrated, we feel burdened and weary, we burn out.

Remind us once more of your ever-present invitation to rest in you, to abide in your love, to trust in your ways, and to wait for you.

Grace us with your Spirit that we might let go, and allow you to direct our paths.

For the sake of Christ we pray, as he taught us 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.**