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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In writing about the Church, Martin Luther commented: "This ministry, that is, the Word of God, Baptism, and Holy Communion, comes directly from Christ .... and is not to be replaced. But the incumbents of the ministry do not remain. They die. This necessitates an ever new supply of preachers whom we install in this ministry to continue preaching the Word and administering the Sacraments."

We are quite familiar with this rhythm of change in the life of the Church. The incumbents of the office are ordained; they serve; they retire; they die; and new ones are ordained to take their place. It has always fascinated me how the Lord continues to provide Pastors for His Church - men with personalities peculiar only to themselves; men of different temperaments; men with misplaced loyalties in the mundane world of professional football.

But this is the pool, so to speak, made up of weak, mortal, human beings - sinners all of them - forgiven sinners to be sure - but this is the group from which God chooses men to be His ambassadors; stewards of the mysteries of His grace; His bondsmen, slaves, literally; laborers in the harvest of souls; under shepherds of Jesus Christ. Amazing that sinners would be entrusted with handling the treasures of God's grace and mercy.

The key - the secret to all of this? It's really quite simple: the incumbent in the office of the ministry is empowered in his service only and alone through the means of grace: the Word of God and the Sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion - these are the tools of the trade. Through these means, the Holy Spirit of God works to perform the miracles of conversion, bringing people to faith in Christ, and assuring them of eternal life in heaven. The Pastor is merely the agent God uses to build His Church. St. Paul tells us why that is: "We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us."

This will be my encouragement to you today, Pastor Fisher, as we recognize your 20 years of service to the Church here at Pilgrim Lutheran. Using Luther's word, my theme is: THE INCUMBENT OF THE OFFICE IS A SERVANT OF THE LORD JESUS, based on the words of Jesus recorded in Luke 17, verses 7-10:

"The Lord said (to His disciples) - which of you, having a servant, plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he comes in from the field, 'come at once and sit down to eat?' But will he not rather say to him, 'Prepare something for my supper, and gird yourself and serve me till I have eaten and drunk, and afterward you will eat and drink?' Does he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I think not! So likewise you when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants. We have done that which was our duty to do.;" This is the Word of the Lord.

In reading the four Gospels, you can't help but be impressed how the Lord Jesus spent hours catechizing His disciples, preparing them to become His Apostles. Some of this catechizing is recorded in the opening verses of Luke chapter 17. We read there how Jesus taught them about the danger of causing offense to a believer, and the dire consequences for the one causing the offense - a millstone should be hung around his neck and he be drowned in the sea. He taught them about repentance and absolution - do it again and again - seven times a day if necessary - when a sinner repents, forgive him. Probably a bit overwhelmed trying to grasp all this, the disciples spoke up: "Lord, increase our faith". So Jesus told them about the mustard seed, that tiny little seed which, when planted, grows into a tree and becomes a haven for the birds of the air. Then He told them about the mulberry tree - tear it up by its roots and plant it in the sea - it will obey you. Really? "Lord, increase our faith!"

Then follow the words of our text - personal words, meant to impress upon the disciples, and Pastors of today as well, three things: obedience, patience, and humility. In return, the servant is to expect nothing, other than the grace of God.

So the Lord drew this word picture. The Master ordered the servant to go and plow the back forty, as it were, with a yoke of oxen, no doubt. And when he was done with that, he was to see about the flock of sheep, mindless creatures that they are, who needed to be brought back into the fold.

The servant did as he was told, bone tired by the end of the day, ready to relax - but there was to be no rest for the weary. Before he even got to take off his shoes, the Master said to him: "Prepare something for my supper, and dress properly while you serve me, and when I am satisfied, then you can find something to eat for yourself." The servant obeyed, and evidently did not even get a "Thank you" from the Master. He just did what was expected of him. And then Jesus concludes this part of the instruction by saying to His disciples: "So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, 'we are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do'".

The Master in the picture is Christ. The servant is the minister of His - the one who is to practice obedience, patience, and humility in his service. Pastor Fisher, we are not asking you to give us an account of your ministry after 20 years of service. It has not been given us to be the judge. That time will come for you when you stand before the throne of God on your personal day of Judgment to give an account of your stewardship - the ministry entrusted to you by the Church. We are here as fellow servants to encourage you, to support you, to pray for you, to share God's Word of instruction with you, even to be examples for you.

I'm sure you will allow that in the years of my ministry I have observed a few things along the way which had practical application to what our Lord taught us in the text before us. In the light, I would simply ask: do we, as Pastors, always see Christ as our Master? The district President is not our Master - even though he is our ecclesiastical supervisor; the board of elders is not our Master, even though they may well require an accounting of our activity from time to time; the church council is not our Master, even though they may expect our cooperation in matters which concern the welfare of the congregation. Our Master is Christ - He has commanded us to preach His Word and to administer the Sacraments according to His institution - not according to the desires of those who might wish the practice of the Church to be more contemporary and open; it is Christ who has commanded us to bring the Word of comfort and hope to the aged parishioner on his deathbed; to bring the Word of Law to the manifest sinner; to apply the Word in counseling to those who have strayed from the way that leads to everlasting life; to share the word of forgiveness, after leading to repentance, with the one arrested for stealing, or even murder.

In the catechesis with His disciples, Jesus was laying out their duties, using action words like plow, tend, and serve. Even in our electronic age, the Lord does not send us an email on Monday morning listing what needs to be done in the week ahead. Our Lord said simply: "Search the Scriptures!" And there you find the action words: preach, teach, administer, comfort, exhort, rebuke, correct, forgive. All of these action words center in the Word of God, and that Word must be spoken by you, to be heard by the soul you are serving. St. Paul reminds us: "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God." So you miss supper with the family because you are still at the hospital bringing words of comfort and assurance to a dying soul. So you are tired at 2 in the morning when distraught parents call because their son was arrested for speeding while under the influence. You go to the police station, not to tell the authorities that the lad is a good kid, but to begin the process of repentance and forgiveness.

At the next elders meeting, as part of your report, you share some of the events of the past month. When you are finished, you note that not a single one of the elders thanked you for disrupting what could have been a pleasant evening with the family, or a good night's sleep. Then you remember what the Master said: "it was your duty to tend to the spiritual needs of the flock in their time of distress."

I said earlier that these words of Jesus addressed to His disciples require 3 things: obedience, patience, and humility. On another occasion Jesus explained these virtues to His disciples by drawing a comparison with the scribes and Pharisees. Jesus said, they do what they do , to be seen by men - they love the best places at feasts, the seat of honor in the synagog, they like it when people greet them in the market place as "Rabbi". But then follow the scathing woes the Lord addressed to these leaders in Israel. But to His disciples Jesus said: "He who is greatest among you shall be your servant." - the servant obedient to his Master - and Jesus reminds us: "One is your Master, even Christ."

Further, the true servant is to practice patience in his service to the Master. How often does not the Pastor feel that his preaching and teaching the Word of God bears no fruit. But that is not your concern - your concern is to preach and to teach - the Holy Spirit produces faith and the resulting fruit of faith. You might be surprised when you see people in heaven because the Holy Spirit worked faith in their heart from the words they heard you preach, and you thought they weren't listening. Your reward is not in having people flock to your church because you are such a spellbinder in the pulpit. In patiently preaching and teaching His Word "you have done that which was your duty to do."

And then there is humility. I always liked what the Apostle Paul told the elders at Ephesus: "The first day I came...I served the Lord with all humility of mind, even with many tears..." It is truly humbling that our God would use sinful human beings like you and me to be His agents, helping to prepare the people entrusted to our care for eternal life, helping to gather the very elect of God to their home in heaven.

My final encouragement to you today, as a servant of the Lord Jesus, is in the words of St. Paul from 2 Corinthians 5: "God has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the ministry of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us, we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God. For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."

Brother Fisher, we offer today our thanksgiving to God, for using you, with your own unique, God-given personality, to perform your duty as an incumbent in the office of the ministry, faithfully preaching the Word and administering the Sacraments. And we pray that your service continue with much joy for the years God has planned for your life. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Pilgrim, West Bend, WI June 8, 2014 - Pastor Fisher 20th anniversary of ordination