

The Point of Christian Ministry

Colleagues,

Today, the Feast of the Ascension, is the hands-down most under-appreciated day in the entire church year. The congregation I serve continues through the sheer stubbornness of its pastors to celebrate an Ascension Day liturgy with as much pizzazz as we can muster when general interest is low. And it is low. I write this the night before the event expecting that we'll be lucky if 80 people show up, and this after a drumbeat of invitation has gone out to our immediate worshiping community of many hundreds, and beyond that to the majority of other congregations in our ELCA conference which have long since thrown in the towel where Ascension Day is concerned. Even our Catholic siblings have lurched in that direction. In the province of the State of Ohio, which includes the turf I trample, observation of the Ascension was transferred a few years ago to the Seventh Sunday of Easter. Grinding an ax, I venture the guess that at some point Little League coaches went head to head with crusty old bishops in imposing Thursday evening obligations on the children of the faithful; whereupon parents bowed as parents will to the petty gods that coaches project themselves as being, and at length the bishops blinked.

I wish they hadn't. More and more it strikes me that if Easter gets a packed house, Ascension deserves an overflowing one. The day's news is at least that good. No one tells it better, of course, than Paul in the first two chapters of Ephesians. We'd all do well to read them slowly before going to bed on Ascension night, paying particular attention to the tenses of the verbs as one plunges from chapter one into chapter two. Christ's position

at the Father's right hand turns unthinkable fantasy into present reality. For example, "God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (2:4-6). No ifs, ands, or buts here. This is the language of the done deal. "Here's where you are, folks. Believe it! Revel in it! Get busy and live it!" And so on.

If only the flock would gather to drink the news in. They don't. Addictions to the habits and assumptions of the present age intrude, as Paul himself kept finding out over and over. The churches of Galatia and Corinth were hardly swirls of Ascension-style joy. Why should I or any other slave of Christ expect more of the churches we labor over today?

All of which brings me to a little offering I dare to pass along for Ascension Day. It's a brief set of theses—bullet-points, in 21st century lingo—on the nature and thrust of ministry in the present era of Christ's rule, when ages overlap (see Eph. 1:21b). I jotted them out some 20 years ago in response to an academic assignment. The overall task was to articulate a "working theology" of Christian ministry. The job for the moment was to identify the key text that drove one's thinking on the topic, and after that to reflect on it briefly. I grabbed right away for Paul's great pastoral plea in 2 Corinthians 5:13–6:2. See below for what spilled out. Most if not all of it will be axiomatically obvious to most of you. Still, two decades later it strikes me as worth revisiting both for me and for anyone else who grieves or gripes about the emptiness of churches on Ascension Day and wonders what to make of that. If that includes you, you'll find Bullet-points 8 and 11 to be especially apropos.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

2 Corinthians 5:13–6:2–

For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them. From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says, 'At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.' See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!

1. Christian ministry in general, to say nothing of ordained Christian ministry in particular, both begins and ends in

that which God has done for all the world and for every human being in Christ Jesus.

2. One might ask whether it is in fact legitimate to speak of my theology of Christian ministry, or yours, since that ministry, no matter by whom it is held, is necessarily shaped and defined with respect to both content and purpose by theou-logos, that is, the Word of God, and more specifically still, the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth—or as Paul would have it, the God who was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself.
3. Christian ministry is, in essence, a work of proclamation. That proclamation, in turn, is in content Christocentric; in character hortatory; in mood imperative; and in spirit urgently invitational. “Be reconciled to God, not later, but now, in this acceptable time, and in this day of salvation.”
4. This invitation rests on certain specific assertions, and among them, first, that of fundamental importance to human life is the relationship of trust which exists, or for that matter which fails to exist, between human beings and God; second, that God on his end has acted unilaterally and unequivocally to make that relationship possible as a present reality; third, that this acting of God is none other than the ministry of suffering and death undertaken by Jesus of Nazareth who was and is the Christ in whom God was reconciling the world to himself.
5. Christian ministry presupposes not only the possibility, but indeed, the ubiquity of human sin, by which is meant an absence of “rightness” with God. It seeks to answer the sinner’s question (the very asking of which is proof of one’s status as sinner) of how it is that one might become right with God (the presumption and perception being that one is not yet that which one wishes to become).

6. To the extent that the aforementioned sinner's question is not being asked, it is the task of ministry to provoke it. This is the precise point at which the Law of God has its distinct and proper function within the context of specifically Christian ministry.
7. Christian ministry is a continuation of the ministry of God in Christ to the world. Those who engage in Christian ministry do so in the enormous presumption that they are envoys of Christ and living, breathing instruments through which God Himself is at work. As Jesus says elsewhere, "The person who receives you receives me."
8. Christian ministry is a work of constant repetition, a necessarily endless inviting of those whose sensory perceptions are drowning in old creation to trust what they hear of God's new creation in Christ, lest the reconciling grace of God should be received by them in vain, and they, for their part, should remain stubbornly unreconciled to God—or as St. John would say, disbelieving. (Note that these words of Paul, so full of urgent passion, appear in his second—or is it his fourth?—letter to a group of people for whom the Gospel is no longer brand new.)
9. From a strictly human point of view, Christian ministry is an insane and a pointless enterprise, best avoided by those who would do something useful with their lives.
10. From God's point of view, Christian ministry is the apogee of temporal human purpose, than which no calling is higher.
11. Those who engage in Christian ministry are of necessity locked in a struggle between the aforementioned points of view. This is nothing other than the omnipresent struggle between faith and unfaith, i.e. between trusting the Gospel of God's reconciliation in Christ Jesus and disbelieving it. The ministering one is therefore

constantly addressed by the very apostolic exhortation which is given him or her to proclaim: "Be reconciled!" Indeed, the first and foundational task of ministry is to fasten one's own ear to that very word, and having done so, to pray for that gift of the Holy Spirit by which alone the word of reconciliation can be received and trusted.

Addendum:

Consider the following from Matthew 9:36ff.: "When Jesus saw the crowds he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.' Then he summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority..." Note here the motivation for Christian ministry, which is nothing other than the passionate compassion of Christ himself, directed in the first place to those whose distress is the greatest. Note also that laborers (i.e. ministers) are sent by God. They are not self-appointed. Note further that Christian ministry begins with prayer to "the Lord of the harvest," who is apparently inclined to answer the prayer with the sending of none other than the pray-ers themselves.

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