



Seeing Ministry Through the Lens of Scripture

William H. Willimon

We begin the discussion with study of the upcoming lectionary texts. You will note that the ministry study also begins in scripture. While there are no direct New Testament directives about the exact form that Christian leadership ought to take, and while specifically “ordained” clergy are not a New Testament concern, large portions of the New Testament are concerned with the purpose, identity, and character of Christian leaders. Jesus told his disciples that when it came to their style of leadership, “it should not be among you as it is among the gentiles.” Ministry in the name of Jesus is characterized by service in the spirit of Jesus.

John Calvin called scripture the “lens” through which Christians look at the world. Because this issue focuses upon ministry, let’s examine this month’s lessons through the lens of Christian ministry, in its many forms. Any time the church gathers and opens the scriptures, one of the questions that is always before us is: What does it mean to be in service with Jesus?

Sunday January 6, 2008
Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7;10-14;
Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

One of the greatest challenges of any Christian ministry is living with and loving those whom Christ attracts to himself.

Loving Christ would be easier if we did not also have to love those whom Christ loves. I’ve never had a pastor call it quits saying, “I’ve had all I can take of Jesus.” No, what they say upon exit is, “I can’t take any more of the church.”

Look whom the baby Jesus has attracted to himself at Epiphany. They are not the legendary “three kings” or “wise men.” They are “magi.” The footnote in my Bible calls them “a learned class in ancient Persia.” But let’s be more honest. They are pagan, star-gazing (a silly pastime that is specifically condemned in Scripture), astrologers from somewhere in present day Iraq. Odd for Matthew (the “most Jewish of the Gospels”)—who repeatedly says that the Bethlehem babe is the fulfillment of the hopes of Israel—to begin his story of Jesus with these gentile magicians bearing perfume. They are the first to journey to the Christ, the first to bow at the manger and worship, offering themselves and their gifts to God Incarnate.

The magi, being gentiles, must go to the Chosen People at the Temple to find out details on the Messiah, for they do not have the Scriptures. Without proper parentage, without biblical grounding, stumbling after a star, these Iraqis see Jesus before the rest of us insider experts on the Bible.

As someone who spends much time at the Temple, someone thoroughly credentialed in the sacred texts, it’s more than a little humbling to be required to confront these pagan Magi before I can get to Jesus.

We thought “epiphany” referred only to the manifestation of Christ. Surprise. Matthew manifests that following Jesus also means walking with that odd assortment of fellow travelers, visitors from the East, stargazers, gullible pagans, and exotic Iraqis who show up to worship Jesus. Can you believe that the Savior who dies for us also suffers for them? If we will be called to ministry in the name of Jesus, we’ll have to follow these magi to the manger.

I say again: one of the greatest challenges of any form of Christian ministry is being ordered to live with and to love those whom Christ attracts to himself.

Sunday January 13, 2008

Isaiah 42: 1-9; Psalm 29; Acts 10:34-43;
Matthew 3:13-17

Jesus’ ministry begins knee deep in cold Jordan water, with the sky ripped open, a big bird descending, and a heavenly voice proclaiming “My Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” (17)

Vocation by some authors has been defined as following your bliss. No, not biblical vocation. Vocation is God’s idea of what our lives should mean. Ministry is an act of God, an intruding word from the outside. Nothing is said here of Jesus’ possible feelings or inner disposition. Matthew could care less about such subjective trivialities. All is objective, external, “from heaven” (17).

Although Matthew proclaimed Jesus’ divine sonship at his birth (1:18-25), it is reiterated that this is all God. Vocation is not the result of human yearning, human assessment of what might bring us bliss. Vocation is God reaching into the world, commandeering, summoning forth our little lives for God’s great purposes. Every time I lay hands on the head of someone, ordering a life into the ministry of the church, I marvel at the relentless resourcefulness of this God to call forth whom God needs to work wonders.

The Ministry Study is clear that all Christian ministry—ordained or not—begins in baptism. We clergy must discipline ourselves not to take over the baptismally given ministry of the laity. The test of clergy vocation is how well we equip and encourage the baptismally based ministry of all Christians (Eph. 5). For all of us when we are baptized, it’s as if the heavens open, the voice of God declares, “This is my beloved, with whom I am well pleased. I’m going to take back my world and guess who’s going to help me!”

Sunday, January 20, 2008

Isaiah 49:1-7; Psalm 40:1-11; 1
Corinthians 1:1-9; John 1:29-42

Clergy were the first “professions,” those who professed before the world a body of truth and doctrine that the world could not know unless someone spoke it. As the “Ministry Study” notes, the call to ministry is inextricably linked to the

ministry of the word. Pastors lead the congregation in testifying to an event—the Word Made Flesh (John 1).

John the Baptizer admits that at first he did not fully know who Jesus was (31, 33). This knowledge cannot be acquired through conventional means. One knows Jesus—not by rummaging about in history (sorry, “Jesus Seminar!”) or by thoughtful philosophizing or methodical research. Only God can make God known (Matt. 16:17). One knows Jesus only as a gift, revelation, grace. Once John receives revelation, he becomes a preacher.

John the Baptist testifies that this Jesus is none other than “the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (29). Jesus has not just engaged in a ministry whereby he nobly teaches spiritual matters or points to a new way of ethics. Jesus works atonement, does something decisive about the distance between us and God. That’s good news.

Immediately the Good News spreads. News is information that demands to be shared. If our ministry is not one of testimony and declaration, this story suggests that Jesus has ceased to be our good news and has become just another piece of information. And we wonder why a majority of United Methodist churches made no new disciples last year!

John witnesses, two of the disciples are pointed toward Jesus, one of them witnesses to his brother who comes to Jesus. Evangelism asks questions like: What are you looking for? Where are you now located? Then evangelism invites and announces: Come and see. We have found the Messiah.

All Christians, by virtue of our baptism, are ministers of this evangelical Word. Let’s go tell it!

Sunday, January 27, 2008

Isaiah 9:1-4; Psalm 27: 1, 4-9; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18;
Matthew 4: 12-23

At last Jesus is ready to begin his ministry. And what is the first thing he does? He calls a group of ordinary people to work for him and with him. This is the way Jesus—the world’s greatest delegator—gets thing done.

When I was a college chaplain, occasionally some student would wander in and ask, “How did you get here?” I found it a threatening question. I wondered if she meant, “How did a loser like you get here?”

Then I tell them. I was a junior in college, thinking about a lot of things, none of which included ministry. A friend talked me into attending a conference, “Exploring Ministry.” I drifted aimlessly through the weekend until late Saturday night when I joined a group of South Carolina pastors who sat on the floor of a hotel room talking about their lives. These were the days of the civil rights movement. One had been a victim of the Klan. Had a cross burned in his yard! Another had a concrete block thrown through the back windshield of his car after a church meeting. The wife and the children of one were snubbed and persecuted in a small Southern town.

I, in my low undergraduate imagination thought, “This sounds great! I didn’t know that being a Methodist preacher was this much fun!”

Sometimes, in popular, American, evangelical Christianity, we get this wrong. We say, "Since I took Jesus into my heart . . ." or "Since I gave my life to Jesus . . ." or "Since I decided to follow Christ . . ." That's not the story. The story in today's Gospel is that you don't take Jesus anywhere — he takes you places. You can't "give your life to Christ." He takes it!

If you're in any sort of ministry, it's because you got put there. For some, it was dramatic and life-changing, for others it was a lifetime of quiet leading and coaxing. For every last one of you, God reached in, grabbed you, called, summoned you, commanding "Follow me."

And you did. Thanks be to God!

Sunday, February 3, 2008

Micah 6:1-8; Psalm 15; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31;
Matthew 5:1-12

My image of us United Methodists is that we come to church on Sunday, armed with notepad and pen, to get our assignment for the week. "Church, this week you ought to work on your racism, sexism. Come back next week and I'll give you another list of things you need to do."

Note that the Gospels tell us mostly what Jesus does and very little of what his followers did. In today's Gospel, before Jesus tells us anything that we should do, he blesses us. Sometimes we Wesleyans are guilty of attempting to reduce salvation to a moralistic program of human betterment, something that we are to believe or to do: "We ought to go out and be peacemakers!"

No. Christian ministry arises out of who God is. Before the gospel is anything we do, it is an announcement of something that God in Christ has done. "Blessed are those who . . ."

And look who gets blessed: mourners, famished, the reviled and persecuted. Christ blesses those whom our world curses. John Wesley set the tone for United Methodist ministry in his work among England's poor and dispossessed. Wesley's turn toward the poor, the sick, the imprisoned, and the addicted arose not so much out of his affection for the poor, though his affection for them was great. Rather Wesley's ministry arose from his theological commitments. Wesley's God was the One who had decisively turned toward the oppressed, whatever their oppression. John Wesley's ministry among those in need was part of his attempt to worship the God who looked upon the suffering multitudes, those whom the world punishes for their righteousness, those whom the world excludes from its rewards and pronounces, "Blessed are you . . ." □



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