

Scripture Readings for June 26th, 2022

Selected verses from 1 Samuel chapters 9-15.

¹⁵ Now the day before Saul came, the LORD had revealed this to Samuel: ¹⁶ “About this time tomorrow I will send you a man from the land of Benjamin. Anoint him ruler over my people Israel; he will deliver them from the hand of the Philistines. I have looked on my people, for their cry has reached me.”

¹⁷ When Samuel caught sight of Saul, the LORD said to him, “This is the man I spoke to you about; he will govern my people.”¹

¹⁵ So all the people went to Gilgal and made Saul king in the presence of the LORD. There they sacrificed fellowship offerings before the LORD, and Saul and all the Israelites held a great celebration.²

Much later we read: ¹⁰ Then the word of the LORD came to Samuel: ¹¹ “I regret that I have made Saul king, because he has turned away from me and has not carried out my instructions.” Samuel was angry, and he cried out to the LORD all that night.³

Ephesians 4:7, 11-13.⁴

⁷ But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. ¹¹ So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, ¹² to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up ¹³ until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Matthew 13:18-23

¹⁸ “Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: ¹⁹ When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path. ²⁰ The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. ²¹ But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. ²² The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful. ²³ But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.”

¹ 1 Samuel 9:15-17.

² 1 Samuel 11:15.

³ 1 Samuel 15:10-11.

⁴ See also: 1 Corinthians 12:27-31.

Sermon: On Christian Leadership and Church Growth

We're going to take a break this week from our series on the Nicene Creed in order to consider the timely topic of church leadership. In a sense, this follows on from last week's topic, "We believe in the church,"⁵ so maybe this could be an appendix entitled, "We believe in church *leadership*."

It's worth reminding ourselves that choosing leaders *within* a church is never easy, and it's not easy to choose a successor to a minister either.⁶ This problem is not unique to churches, of course, *all* places of work face the same issues.⁷ Whether in the world of the sacred or secular, there is a process to be undertaken, one that requires serious reflection and forethought, recognizing that the priorities for the future are not automatically the needs of the past. Simply looking for a clone of the precious CEO is probably not be the wisest thing to do! Instead, it's important to have an honest assessment of the outgoing leader's strengths and weaknesses, along with an appraisal of the current needs and goals of the organization, and that ought to shape the choice of their successor. What kind of minister you choose is - of course - for *you* to decide but allow me to suggest a few general thoughts on the matter, which you are free to ignore!

Let's begin by briefly considering what the Bible has to say about leadership.⁸ You'll remember that when Jesus sent his disciples out to spread the good news of the kingdom of God, he sent them *in pairs*.⁹ The early church seemed to value that model, in that Barnabas and Paul went together on their missionary journeys, and later so did Paul and Silas - and others. Paul, who planted many churches in his missionary career, also recognized that a local church community needed a variety of leaders with different giftedness for the health and wellbeing of their congregation. As we heard in our reading from Ephesians, Paul writes, "Christ himself gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, to foster unity, to become knowledgeable about the faith, and to develop spiritual maturity."¹⁰ What do those roles entail? Let me try and give a partial outline: First, apostles have authority that was recognized *throughout* the church; in those days we would think of Peter and Paul as two prime examples.¹¹ Today, we could think of the Pope, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the Moderator of the whole Presbyterian Church in Canada, as having such a role. Second, a prophet is someone who is known for speaking God's word *into* a specific situation. Like Jesus and John the Baptist, they were usually itinerant travelers, rather than fixed in one location. Third, evangelists are "missionaries" who bring the good news in effective ways to those who had yet not heard. Fourth, pastors are shepherds of the flock and care for the holistic well-being of their

⁵ See: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/We-Believe-in-the-Church.pdf> .

⁶ See also: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Choosing-Leaders.pdf> .

⁷ Although there is a profound spiritual dimension to be considered within churches, and we overlook that at our peril.

⁸ For the purposes of simplicity, I am omitting musicians and singers/choirs – important though they undoubtedly are!

⁹ See Matt 10; Luke 9:1-6; 10:1-24.

¹⁰ See: Eph 4:7, 11-13; 1 Cor 12:27-31.

¹¹ According to Acts 1:21-22, one criterion to be an apostle is someone who witnessed the risen Jesus (cf. 1 Cor 9:1). Other people who were referred to as apostles include Barnabas (Acts 14:14) and James the brother of Jesus (1 Cor 15:7; Gal 1:19).

congregants and the inter-relationships within the church community. Finally, teachers explain the Bible's contents along with Christian theology and doctrine to their local congregation. Both pastors and teachers are necessary for the congregation stay safe and to mature in their faith. This list is not exhaustive; for example, in 1 Corinthians Paul mentions "helpers" who would come along side people in their need.¹² This can happen in so many ways, including giving lifts to those who need a ride for medical appointments, serving food a soup kitchen, and those who fix things and care for the buildings, etc.¹³ All these gifts, skills, and talents – and others, such as music and administration - are harmonized through teamwork working towards an agreed common goal, cemented through mutual love and a vibrant faith.

Teamwork was therefore seen as an important principle in church leadership and in sharing the roles and tasks that are needed for a healthy church. I mention this because some denominations are better than others in modelling that behavior. For example, Anglicans often – though not always, these days – have a vicar and curate, or a deacon, working together in leading a parish. Presbyterians are particularly bad at this and typically have a one-person ministry in most churches. (Its not the only denomination with that problem!) The denomination tries to compensate for this by empowering elders.¹⁴ Nevertheless, in practice, the minister is often expected to be many of those things Paul mentioned: a pastor, a teacher, a prophet, an evangelist, a helper, and a miracle worker!¹⁵ Implicit in Paul's list is the assumption that one person *doesn't* have all those gifts! I recall one of the things we were told at Knox College is that the biggest thing a minister brings to a church is *themselves*. And I believe that to be true. A person's character, personality, competence, life-experience, and authenticity is their true gift of themselves to a congregation. Without that, whatever other giftedness a person has is tainted. In addition, as you will have guessed, I am a teaching pastor and I have sought to equip you for integrating faith and life, and to foster spiritual and personal development. In *addition* to the role of teaching pastor, here's an incomplete list of various kinds of ministers or preachers:

1. The manager pastor is the "plate spinner" who keeps all the programs of a large church going.
2. The palliative care pastor, who like a chaplain, gives grace and dignity to a dying church.
3. The charismatic speaker-leader who you would follow to the ends of the earth.
4. The feel-good after-dinner speaker, who inspires and entertains with witty anecdotes and jokes.
5. The chaplain, who - like a counsellor or spiritual guide - you consult only when in need.
6. The social prophet who is primarily concerned with addressing injustice and community causes.
7. An evangelist or contemporary communicator who endeavors to grow the church numerically.

¹² See I Cor 12:28.

¹³ Paul also mentions "encouragers" and "generous donors" having a role; Rom 12:8.

¹⁴ And in the Presbytery and higher courts, the membership is equal numbers of elders to ministers in all voting, so that the voice of the people is heard.

¹⁵ See I Cor 12:27-30 for the mention of healing (and speaking in tongues).

The first two (manager pastor and palliative care pastor) are *irrelevant* for St. Andrew's, but such ministers exist. Megachurches and TV preachers come into the first of the two gifted-speaker examples, and obviously can be very attractive. But they can also become a personality cult, and many people are prone to follow *them* rather than Jesus Christ. A biblical example of this is the sad story of King Saul, the first king of Israel. 1 Samuel 9:2 tells us Saul was young, handsome, and very tall. He also quickly became a military hero and so oozed all the qualities the people wanted to lead and protect them as king. But all that adulation and success went to his head, and he stopped following God. We are told even God regretted choosing him as king!¹⁶ Sometimes those who we imagine would be great leaders have character flaws and let us down. Beware the charismatic leader with feet of clay!

Back to our list: On a more numerically modest scale, the charming after-dinner speaker is engaging and many like that safe, casual style because it affirms us - and we like to feel good about ourselves. The chaplain is also non-threatening, and, like a hospital chaplain or a therapist, a chaplain is there if and when we need them and for the rest of the time we can ignore them and carry on with our lives as we wish. The social prophet is the activist who won't let you remain comfortable for long. They look out at the wider world and see the church's primary mission as making a real, tangible difference for a range of good social and ethical causes. The evangelist also focuses on the world outside of the church's doors and, traditionally at least, seeks to bring them inside. Let me comment on that role briefly because the word "evangelist" seems most un-Presbyterian! For many, our minds think of revivalist preachers who try to scare people into heaven by lots of talk about hell! Such people exist, but that's *not* what I mean. An evangelist is personable and is particularly skilled at engaging those outside the church with grace, friendship, so meeting people where they are at. They are effective communicators of the love of Jesus Christ, such that people's interest is piqued and they would like to know more.

Given that broad spectrum of roles, we can see how impossible it is to find all those qualities in a *single* person – especially if we want them to work part-time! What we ideally want is a charismatic speaker who can tell good jokes, make us feel good; a preacher who doesn't make demands but has a social conscience, and who will grow the church while at the same time be present for all the pastoral needs within the congregation! This is the Marvel Comic superhero who, in reality, doesn't exist! So a church has to *prioritize* its needs and desires in a minister, and realistically acknowledge that it can't have it all. In practice that means the things that the minister doesn't do *either* don't get done, and we are content with that, *or* it means the congregation has taken an inventory of *its own* giftedness and talents - and will commit to do use them. Knowing what is possible *within* a congregation means that the church family can seek a minister with *complementary* giftedness and skills to their own.

Let me talk a little more about growing the church numerically. In *any* church, the most *straightforward* way to achieve that is for the congregation to tell their family, friends, and neighbors. If 30 people do that, this could – say - double the congregation in a way that is faster than the minister who seeks to

¹⁶ 1 Sam 15:11.

bring 30 more people into the church. The logic of that is powerful, even if everyone is squirming in their seats on hearing that! One advantage of that approach is that the *kind* of people who would come to the church would likely be people like yourselves and that would make social integration easier. If on, the other hand, an evangelist-minister brings in 30 people, the *kind* of people who may respond to the evangelist's invitation may be very different from you. Growing the church numerically challenges us to either *invite* our neighbors or to *welcome* strangers. If a minister brings in 30 new people, a congregation must wholeheartedly support that initiative through forging new friendships with them and genuinely growing and uniting the community. And you can see how that is a practical consequence of what I said last week; "We believe the church is *one* or *united*, is *inclusive* or *all-embracing*" - even of those *unlike* ourselves. In short, to grow the church numerically, we have to be prepared to *change* something. So one of the questions going forward is *what changes* are we prepared to undertake in ourselves and in our worship and other activities to accommodate potential growth?

It goes without saying that if some kind of evangelist *is* deemed to be a priority, then they must be free to work *outside* of the church within the community for substantial amounts of time. And that means the pastoral care *within* the church family will need to be undertaken by others. As I said earlier, a minister – even a young, energetic one - *isn't* a superhero and so *can't* do everything! Alternatively, if, upon sober reflection, the church community wants to minimise change, then that's best achieved by you growing the church by everyone inviting their friends. That means if *you're* doing the evangelism, then the minister need *not* have that gift and can complement your outreach by pastoral care and inspired speaking, etc. As you can see, there are various moving parts to be considered here and I encourage you to be realistic and wise in your deliberations moving forward.

While on this subject of church growth, let's conclude by briefly remind ourselves of the parable of the sower.¹⁷ It begins, "A farmer went out to sow his seed."¹⁸ The identity of the farmer is *not* identified, so we can modernize it to include an evangelist or you or me. The seed, Jesus later tells his followers, is the good news of God's kingdom.¹⁹ The sower scatters the seed *generously* to all who will hear, and that seems to be an inefficient, even a thankless, task. The sower doesn't know *which* seed will grow but shares the good news indiscriminately anyway and then waits to see what happens. The context of this story in Matthew's Gospel is the apparent failure of Jesus' own ministry to his fellow Jews. People often ask: "Why is it that good news that "God's kingdom is at hand"²⁰ was *not* received enthusiastically by Jews?" You would think that religious people would be *excited* that a prophet²¹ is present among them. Christians often ask the same kind of question today: why is it that despite the all the preaching and teaching of ministers and evangelists, and by invitations to friends by congregants, the message seems to fall on deaf ears and congregations are not growing in numbers? Moreover, some people start

¹⁷ See also: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Listen-Understand-Grow-and-Persevere.pdf> .

¹⁸ Matt 13:3b.

¹⁹ Matt 13:19.

²⁰ See Matt 3:2; 4:17 and Mark 1:15.

²¹ Naturally, I believe Jesus was the Messiah! But, an the very minimum, Jesus was a prophet (like John the Baptist).

off following Jesus, but they seem to drift away for some reason; why is that? That was a common enough experience then, as it is today.

Jesus responds through this parable by saying there are two broad categories of soil: *productive* and *unproductive*. Jesus explains to his followers the various reasons for the unproductive soil, and that was read to us earlier. I won't go into that today as I have preached on this topic before.²² The productive soil also gives a *variety* of yields – it's *not* uniformly good! The quantities mentioned are 100, 60, and a 30-fold increase per seed planted. There is nothing miraculous here, it simply *affirms* that despite much disappointment, there *will* be a harvest and, in some places, spectacularly so. My key point today in the context of sharing the good news, is that we are to *keep on* sowing, recognizing the seed is vulnerable, growth is slow, and success in *each* seed is not guaranteed for all kinds of reasons that are outside of our control. Nevertheless, we are to be encouraged, confident *God* will bring about his final harvest.

Let me end with these words of promise from the prophet Isaiah:

“As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it *yields seed for the sower* and bread for the eater, so is *my word that goes out* from my mouth: It will not return to me empty but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.”²³

Therefore, since the word of God is powerful and effective, and since the Holy Spirit is still active in the church and in the world, the church can't lose hope but continue to partner with God. Amen. Let us pray.

²² See Matt 13:18-23 and see [16].

²³ Isa 55:10-11.