

A Call Delayed
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Candidate Sermon for Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
March 14, 2021

Let us pray for an awareness of and inspiration from God's Spirit.

Living God, we are hungry for Good News and for the nudge of your spirit so by your Holy Spirit, open our eyes to the new light of this day and open our hearts to hear the good news, open our spirits to invite others into conversation, and open our lips to share the good news with others freely. Through Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

Romans 12:1–18

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.

For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

Ephesians 4:11–16

The gifts God gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

The only way I can think to start of this whole thing is to just name that it is weird. Frankly, this is one of the things about the Presbyterian Church that I find weird in the best of circumstances. And we know this pandemic time isn't the best of circumstances. How I wish we could begin this potential partnership in a different way. It just doesn't feel as

good as it should because I am standing here delivering this sermon to a relatively empty sanctuary. The many members of the one body of Christ as represented by you, the members of Oak Grove Presbyterian Church, are still dispersed. Frankly, it doesn't feel right, to not be able to see your faces, to shake your hands, to greet you, to sit with the younger ones and share some time with them. How hard it has been for you all not to have been able to gather for so many months. These are extraordinary circumstances. This is not how I would choose to start, but there have been so many things we have not gotten to choose to do this past year.

And yet, even amidst the strange and new ways so many churches have had to learn to be the church, to remain connected to one another without the ability to gather physically together, to learn the intricacies of zoom and to continue to remind people they are still muted, I am certain and convinced of a few things. I am confident the Holy Spirit has been at work, is at work and will continue to be so. I believe the church is definitely not, and never has been, the building. The mission of God through the church has not changed; there is still praise to shout, the grieving to comfort, the stranger and outcast to welcome, new insight and knowledge to be gained, risks to take, injustice to correct, hope to share, and love to give.

I'm also convinced that God will continue to use our gifts and call us to new places and new opportunities. I am excited, should you agree, to see what the future holds for Oak Grove and where God will lead this church. You should be immensely proud, maybe even sinfully proud as some Presbyterians say, of the work that your Pastor Nominating Committee has done. They are a dedicated faithful bunch who has taken their role seriously. I am grateful for their grace, diligence, and hard work.

Both pieces of scripture I read earlier are, for me, foundational texts for how I understand the role of pastor, how I understand the larger call of the church, and how the pastor and the congregation work together. Ephesians 4 highlights several roles, among them prophet, preacher, and teacher to equip the saints for ministry. Romans 12 highlights the fact that we all have gifts given to us from the Holy Spirit, that all gifts are important, and they are to be used together. Both pieces of scripture promote a mutually interdependent relationship of support, compassion, and love.

I grew up in Cincinnati, and my family were faithful churchgoers at Pleasant Ridge Presbyterian Church. Both my parents were ordained as Deacons and Elders, served as youth advisors to the large youth group, and were active in adult study and fellowship groups. Growing up, church attendance was not an option in my house, in fact, the rule in my house when I was a teenager was that if we missed church on Sunday, we were not allowed to go out the following Saturday night. However, that rule was rarely invoked because I loved being involved at the church and by about the start of my junior year in high school, I began to feel the nudge toward ordained ministry as a pastor.

At about the same time as I was beginning to hear God's pull on my life, the church that I loved so dearly was experiencing significant conflict. Pleasant Ridge had been served faithfully by their pastor for almost 30 years, and when the next pastor was called, the church did not go through an interim period. It was not a requirement in the church then and so the next pastor became an unintentional interim. About four years into the new pastor's tenure there was disagreement and discord.

This conflict was displayed by adults in my life, my parents included, that I loved and respected, but the conflict manifested in ways that were not loving and respectful. It was confusing and disheartening. I was

feeling a call into leadership for the church but based on what I was seeing in my church home, I could not imagine serving in a congregation. It was the first time in my life where my call was delayed, or at least, did not go as I expected. After I graduated high school, I stopped being involved with a church on a regular basis.

Through most of my twenties, I would periodically drop into a church to dip my toe in the water again, but I never dove back in. Then, in my late twenties, I began to feel the pull of needing a community of faith around me again. It took a while, but I eventually found a congregation here in the Twin Cities, First Congregational United Church of Christ, and I began to fall in love again with the church. This congregation was committed to justice, a little messy, honest, caring, and open and inclusive. I began to pay attention again, to God's nudging in my life.

I met with the pastor of First Church, Eric, to talk about prayer and how to maintain an active prayer life again. We sat at lunch together, and before I uttered a word, Eric said, "So, you are thinking of being a pastor, huh?" It was surprising because I had never said anything to Eric before about this, but he was right. Shortly after that conversation, I had opportunity to have dinner with my former youth pastor, Nick. As we talked, eventually he looked at me and said, "You get that these are the same things we talked about 12 years ago, right? You should think about pastoral ministry."

A few other nudges happened along the way and I finally listened and was ordained as a pastor in the Presbyterian Church. About five years into my first call, where I served as an associate pastor, I began to feel a sense that it was time for a potential change. I put my materials out and began to interview. I had several interviews with a vibrant church. A congregation committed to justice, that seemed very caring, that was active in service to the community, was open and inclusive, was

authentic and a little messy. I was hopeful about the possibility of serving this church as pastor, if a little intimidated that I didn't have quite enough experience yet. As the process continued, I learned I was one of the final candidates. I met some of the staff and toured the church building; there was a wonderful spirit about the place. I got a call from the Pastor Nominating Committee (PNC) that they believed God was leading them to call the other candidate. I was disappointed but had peace about the decision and knew the PNC had been faithful. God had different plans for me.

I stayed for several more years as my responsibilities and call shifted in place where I had been serving. I eventually became pastor and head of staff for the church I currently serve. A little less than a year ago, as many churches were figuring out how to continue being the church in a pandemic, I began looking at websites of churches I was familiar with to see how they were worshipping virtually to gain insight. After looking at several, a little voice said, "what about that church you interviewed with about 12 years ago, I wonder how they are worshipping virtually?"

I looked at the website and discovered the church was looking for a new pastor. I read the church information form, and to my surprise, I was excited about the possibility. You see, I was happy in my current call and was not looking to change, but there was that voice, that nudge again that said, "maybe." After some conversation with my wife, and some prayer and discernment, I put together my materials and submitted them for consideration to the PNC. Perhaps it was a call after all, just delayed. Perhaps God knew I needed more time, more experience. Perhaps my skills and gifts were meant for a time such as this with this congregation, but not before.

After prayer, discussion, and discernment, and an unexpected but faithful delay, I stand before you as the candidate to be your pastor in this time, at this moment.

Friends, I think the world needs the church. There is so much wrong in the world. It gets overwhelming at times when you think of it. We are a year into a global pandemic. The earth is seeing more and more drastic natural disasters as the impacts of climate change increase and human's denial and lack of will to do something about it continue. The summer of George Floyd's murder and the subsequent unrest highlighted, once again, the racial unrest and inequality that has always been present in this country, but for which only now are some people realizing exists.

The poverty and wage gap continues to increase...

Injustice seems relentless...

Uncertainty seems relentless...

And yet, God is not done with us yet. The church dares to declare that God is not done with us, that God continues to love us. That God's desire is that the church join with God in being bearers of good news; that we speak a word of hope into despair; that we offer a refuge to those who are lost; that we offer a cup of cold water to those that are thirsty and a warm meal to those that are hungry; that we offer companionship to the lonely; that we demand and work for justice for those pushed to the bottom and the margins of society; that we do the hard work of self-reflection and acknowledge how we have contributed to injustice; that we remind people that all are made in the image of God and are beloved children of God; that we serve generously against a world that says there is never enough; that we are the tangible presence and witness to the way God loves the world.

This is the call of the church. This is a tall order. It is a big job.

In Romans, Paul outlines this as the job description for the church.

- Let love be genuine
- Hate what is evil
- Hold fast to what is good.
- Love one another
- Outdo one another in showing honor
- Be ardent in spirit
- Serve the Lord
- Rejoice in hope
- Be patient in suffering
- Persevere in prayer
- Contribute to those in need
- Extend hospitality to strangers
- Bless even the people who persecute you
- Rejoice when people rejoice
- Cry with those who cry
- Live in harmony with one another
- Don't be haughty
- Associate with the lowly
- Don't claim to be wiser than you are
- Don't repay evil with evil
- Live in peace as much as possible
- Never avenge yourselves
- If someone is hungry, feed them
- If someone is thirsty, give them something to drink
- Don't get overwhelmed by all the evil in the world, instead overcome evil with good.

Wow, it's a lot. That's like 2 ½ times longer than the Ten Commandments.

I honestly get a little worried and overwhelmed at this list at times. I can't do it all. But that's also the point. It's not just about me. It takes all of us to do this. The good thing is, the church is not one person, and it certainly isn't the pastor. It's the gathering of faithful people who, together, attempt to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.

It is evident that Oak Grove Presbyterian Church takes this call seriously and intentionally. From the stories of nurture and care between members that I have heard, to your commitment to caring for the earth, supporting youth, feeding your community, to the radical hospitality offered to LGBTQIA+ persons, to your advocacy and commitment to anti-racist practices and justice, your exploration and commitment to restorative justice, and the hundreds and thousands of small acts of mercy, gratitude, and grace that remain known only to a single person or amongst a few. In this way, you love God, one another, and your neighbors. And I am excited about the potential of being a part of all of this with and alongside of you. I am excited to learn with and from you, serve with you, challenge you, encourage you, comfort and support you, and grow with you in love.

Above all, with God's help, should you agree, I promise to be your pastor. And what that means to be at its most basic and fundamental level is that I will to the best of my ability, love you. I will do my best, and I will make mistakes, and I will ask for your grace and forgiveness when that happens, and I will offer the same. But it is my hope and prayer, that we move into the future together, in a loving partnership as we attempt to demonstrate just how much God loves the world through us. Amen.