



Redefining lay ministry
- by
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“The gifts he 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 knitted 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.” – Ephesians 4:11-16

I have to admit to feeling a surge of disappointment sometimes when some dedicated and faithful lay person discerns that they are called to ordained ministry. Everyone else will be greeting their decision with joy, and I will find myself a little on the edge, unable to fully celebrate with them.

I've done a lot of soul searching about this. Why do I feel as I do? What does it mean? Am I jealous? Full of petty resentment? Maybe I should be thinking of the priesthood myself?

The cause of my letdown, I have realized, is that I don't like the conclusion we all leap to – that because someone is very serious about their spiritual life and desirous of dedicating their days to serving God, they need to become a priest. I wonder if they are not mistaking a call to love God with all their heart, soul and might for a call to become a pastor in a church. I know that often people are genuinely called to that more specific way of being in relationship with Christ and Christ's church. When that is true, it is truly a cause for celebration. But so is any clear discernment of any calling. We ought to be celebrating each with equal verve.

Our job in this era is to redefine for ourselves what it means to be a lay person. The church as we know it may not survive through this century, and if it does, leadership will look different than it does now. And so we common folk need to put our elbows out and bring to words for ourselves and for the Body of Christ what it means to be an on-fire bunch of saints bearing witness and living into our gifts right along with our priests. That means all our gifts, since each one of us is called. We need to make places for ourselves that fit new found understandings of the need to put God first in our lives. There are no roles, so we need to do the arduous work of creating them.

Reading through this passage from Ephesians I am stirred by the vision of a church in which every member promotes the growth of the Body of Christ, building it up in love. It is a place where each participant in the group has gifts, knows what they are, and uses them to the benefit of all the other members and the world beyond their doors.

I am assuming that each gift is honored to the same degree as all the others. But who really knows. It's a sketchy picture at best. And it's probably also an ideal that was rarely actually realized. Still, it's something to hang on to as we re-imagine what is possible for us in living in Christian community.

In this brand new year, as we each wake up to our relationship with God and allow it to set our hearts ablaze, let's use this model from Ephesians. In fact, let's use it and whatever else we can get our hands on to determine for ourselves how we ought to live together. How can we honour each of our gifts and our contributions to the Body? How can we encourage one another? How can we open for ourselves and one another new avenues for realizing God's dream for the world – right here and right now?

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