

Tracy Daub
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Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

QUALIFIED CANDIDATES

We clergy people tend to be rather proud of our qualifications and educational credentials for ministry. And Presbyterian pastors in particular are among the clergy who face especially stringent demands before they can be ordained. Those wishing to be Presbyterian pastors must first hold a college degree. Then they must be accepted at a seminary or divinity school and study for 3 years to obtain a Master's of Divinity degree, taking classes in theology, biblical exegesis, preaching, Christian education, and church history as well as ancient Greek and Hebrew, the languages in which the Bible was written. They are required to serve as a student intern in a church or other pastoral setting, like a hospital. And there are also special ordination examinations that Presbyterian candidates for ministry are required to pass. In addition, candidates for ministry must be guided by their local presbytery who meet with them over the course of their 3 years in seminary and determine their suitability for ministry. Finally, before becoming ordained, a candidate must write a statement of faith and then read it before the Presbytery, after which, the members of the Presbytery will undertake a verbal examination of the candidate on topics of theology and belief. And then the Presbytery takes a vote on whether to ordain this person or not.

The Book of Acts gives us a radically different election process for a church leader. The eleven remaining disciples need to fill the vacancy left by Judas and so they set about seeking qualified candidates. And do you recall what the qualification was for this position? The only requirement was that the candidate had to have been around to witness Jesus' life and death. That's it. All the person had to do was be a living breathing person who witnessed Jesus' life.

There was no theology test! There was no church internship required. There was no statement of faith they had to write. There was no requirement for literacy or a special educational degree. Just the requirement that you were there. That you were there to witness all that Jesus did and said.

Two candidates fit this very meager requirement: a guy named Matthias and a guy named Barsabbas. The disciples must decide which of the two shall fill the vacancy. So they conduct an election—not by voting but by casting lots! Think about that! There was no sit down interview, no debate between the candidates about who was most suited for the position, no questions directed to the candidates about their theological beliefs, their leadership style, their vision for how to grow the church, their pastoral sensitivity. Instead, the choice was made through the random act of casting lots.

Now the casting of lots may not be something I would recommend in choosing our church leaders today. But I do think this story offers us a profound message for us. Those eleven disciples seeking to fill the vacancy were comfortable selecting a new disciple through a seemingly random kind of election process because they believed, they trusted that either man had what it took to do the job. Without any interview, without any special education, without knowing if they possessed any special skills, the disciples trusted that both of them were qualified for the job.

And what was the job? Our scripture states that the job for this new disciple was witnessing to the resurrection. Witnessing to God's triumph over sin and darkness. Witnessing to God's power of life over death. Witnessing to the God of love and hope. Both Matthias and Barsabbas could do that because they had been with Jesus and witnessed God's power of

resurrection. The other eleven disciples trusted that both Matthias as well as Barsabbas had what it took to do the job.

There is wisdom in having an educated and trained clergy. But I do think that too often, lay Christians have adopted the mindset that ministry is best left to the professionals. And throughout history, the professional clergy have been only too eager to assume the status as the ones qualified to do ministry. As a result, sometimes lay people do not feel qualified or confident in their role as disciples of Christ.

One of those theological questions a Presbyterian candidate for ministry might be asked in their ordination examination could be the doctrine of *the priesthood of all believers*. This doctrine, the priesthood of all believers, is an important and foundational belief among Presbyterians. What it means is that we Presbyterians believe that *all* Christians, not just the clergy, are called by God to the priesthood. We use that term “priesthood” in a broad way—to indicate that serving Christ is not something only a few select people are called to do, but rather all of us believers are called through our baptism to serve Christ. We may earn a living as teachers or doctors or sales reps, but we are still called to this “priesthood”—to serve as Christ’s disciples.

And not only are you, yes *you* called to serve Christ, you are also qualified to serve Christ. That’s right. You are a qualified member of the priesthood. Just like Matthias and Barsabbas, *you* have what it takes to witness to the resurrection.

Now for some among us, that is a hard idea to swallow. We may lack confidence in our place in this so-called “priesthood.” Maybe we think to ourselves, “I don’t know the Bible well enough.” Or “I’m not a good public speaker.” Or “I wouldn’t know how to talk about my faith.” And maybe we feel unqualified because of our own failings. We have done things for which we

are ashamed and there is no way we could ever imagine ourselves as qualified to be part of God's holy priesthood.

But let us pause for a second and consider those first twelve disciples, chosen by Jesus to become his followers. All of them chosen without interview, without resumes, without references. Chosen by Jesus who was confident they had what it took to become disciples to the good news of God's love.

And then, let us recall what happened to the twelve. *All of them failed at the job!* They failed Jesus. They betrayed him, denied him, and abandoned him when he most needed them. But what happens after this colossal failure? Jesus calls them once again to feed his sheep, to tend his sheep, to love his sheep. Even after this failure they are put right back into ministry. Can you imagine any company or organization taking the very people who had just completely failed at their jobs and then putting them back into leadership? That is what Jesus did.

Jesus knew that those who have faced their own brokenness are likely to understand the good news of the resurrection the best. If you have faced your own brokenness, it is possible that you too have witnessed the resurrecting love and mercy of God. And that makes you an ideal witness! An ideal priest for Christ! Do you see what Jesus does with failure and imperfections? Failures and imperfections are not obstacles to ministry. Jesus uses them, transforms them, into qualifications for ministry!

Jesus is confident that you have what it takes to serve him, to bear witness to the good news of the resurrection. And there are a million ways you can do this in your life. St. Francis of Assisi is attributed to have said, "Preach the gospel at all times, and if necessary use words." Witnessing to the resurrection is not only about what we say but also what we do. Witnessing to the resurrection means standing up for justice, writing letters, marching in protest. It means

extending compassion, practicing forgiveness, including the outcast. It means living out the hope in the existence of a loving God and the hope we have in the power of the God of life. There are millions of ways to witness to the resurrection and you are more than qualified to carry out a great many of them.

This past Tuesday, a group of us from UPC drove to Syracuse to attend the memorial service for Mac Sabol. The service was held at University United Methodist Church, a large, grand church building. The church occupies a prominent position right next to the university, just as we here at UPC occupy a similar position right next to our university. As I walked toward the church building, I couldn't help but see the three enormous banners hanging across the front of the church building, where no one could miss seeing them. The first enormous banner stated, "Black Lives Matter." The second enormous banner read, "Immigrants and Refugees are welcome." The third giant banner was the LGBTQ rainbow flag with the words, "All are welcome here." These three banners boldly proclaimed the gospel of God's love for groups of people who have not always received society's love or, regrettably, the church's love. The University United Methodist Church in Syracuse has found a way to witness to the resurrection power of God's love and justice.

Jesus knows that you are more than qualified to witness to God's resurrection power and presence. And so Jesus calls you to the priesthood. Is that intimidating? Sure it is. But we are not alone in this ministry. In the passage we read today from the Gospel of John, Jesus is praying aloud just before he is arrested and crucified. We get to listen in on this prayer. Knowing that he is about to face a great ordeal, a time of testing and pain and suffering, we might expect Jesus to be praying for himself. But instead, we hear him praying for us, his followers. He prays that as we make our way through this difficult and challenging journey

through life, we may be one with God, and with God's ways, and with God's truth. In other words, Jesus prays for you, for you and your ministry, for you and your witness to the resurrecting love of God.