

Let me begin by telling you what an honor and a privilege it is for me to be with you today. I was living in Brussels ten years ago when Larry and Carol came to Paris to begin their ministry at the American Church. Their eagerly awaited arrival was not a thing indifferent to me. I had also served the Paris church as an associate pastor about 15 years earlier and had a deep appreciation for that ministry and love for those people. I was personally invested in seeing that the congregation was well served. I was also eager to have a colleague with whom I could relate a few hours to the south of me.

I was not disappointed on either count. Larry and Carol became dear friends and the American Church in Paris was extraordinarily well pastored during the nine years that followed. Larry is one of those rare pastors who is able to combine the roles of pastor and scholar in just the right proportions, so that it all works marvelously. He combines that with a personal warmth, a love of people, and a devotion to God that makes him a gift to all who know him. I trust you already know the treasure you have among you. And so it is a real joy today to be able to be a part of another of Larry's beginnings.

Today is a day when hope and expectation flow easily and without effort. We all look eagerly to what the future will bring in this place.

Pastors sometimes joke about still being on their "honeymoon" with a congregation, that time of infatuation before each knows all of the foibles,

faults and failures of the other. There is implied in such an understanding an expectation that the honeymoon will draw to a close, and indeed it will. It is inevitable in a healthy relationship that mere infatuation will give way as the pastor and people, over time, come to know each other far more deeply than they do at the beginning. There are two directions in which a relationship can move as early illusions fade—it can take the path of disillusionment and disappointment, or it can deepen and mature into genuine, lasting love. What I want us to think about today is what it will take for each day that follows to be filled with the same joyous anticipation that we feel today.

The truth is, ministry can be among the most challenging of the professions. It can take a tremendous personal toll on a pastor and a pastor's family. In particular, it can be a terribly lonely job, a claim that may seem strange to those who have never stood in the role. Aren't pastors, after all, surrounded by people almost all the time? Aren't they often the center of attention? And don't they enter into life in all kinds of meaningful ways?

Yes, all that is true, but there is a subtle sense in which the person who is the pastor must always take second place to the role that the pastor plays in the congregation. I'm not talking here about being false or inauthentic, but, I am talking about what it takes to honor the high calling of being the one who dares to represent the presence of the divine in the midst of God's people, day by day, week by week, in church and

community, at the bedside and the graveside, in meeting rooms and Bible studies, at baptisms and marriages, in conflicts and celebrations.

To some extent, that is the nature of ministry. I suspect it has always been and will continue to be so. That is why it is not an incidental matter for a pastor to have regular time to nurture the person he or she is, quite apart from the role played in the church community. Both pastor and people must be intentional about creating opportunities for personal renewal for the pastor.

Additionally, however, that there are healthy ways for pastors and people to think about what it means to be in ministry together that will allow both to thrive and grow in the midst of living out the claim of God upon their lives. Let's turn to our texts.

Moses is feeling pretty good about himself when his father-in-law comes to visit. After all, he is at the very center of everything that is happening and has become utterly indispensable to the people. Not only has he successfully led the people out of captivity in Egypt, but now he mediates every aspect of their common life. Jethro, the old priest, silently observes Moses at work for an entire day.

He sees how the people come to Moses with everything that ails them. Disputes with neighbors, family problems, questions about religion, you name it—Moses is the one who sets them straight. Finally, at the end of a long, long day, Moses and the old man sit down for a cup of tea before bed. The conversation begins innocently enough.

“So, tell me son, what was that I saw going on all day?”

“Well,” replies Moses, perhaps with a tinge of pride in his voice, “the people come to me whenever they have a problem. I’m the one who sets them straight.”

Do you remember, by the way, how many Israelites the scriptures tell us were living in Egypt at the time of the Exodus? There were some 400,000! It's not entirely clear that they all came with Moses, but this was no small band of desert wanderers.

One of the great gifts God gives to some of us who are leaders is a family member who is inclined to say to us what no one else dare to say. (Right, Carol?) I know it doesn't always feel like a gift at the time, but Moses, to his credit, is willing to listen as his father-in-law lowers the boom on him.

Instead of being impressed with how hard Moses is working and how important he has made himself in the eyes of all the people, the old priest delivers the word of wisdom born of years of experience.

“What you are doing is not good. You will surely wear yourself out....” Now, listen to this next part... “you, and these people with you.”

When the pastor does not order the community in such a way that responsibility is shared across the board, *everyone* pays the price.

Jethro goes on to set Moses straight. He tells him that there are appropriate roles for him to play as the leader of the

community. He should indeed represent the people before God. He should be a teacher and proclaimer of God's word in the midst of the people. But there are significant roles that must be entrusted to others, to those who are worthy within the community. Appoint ones who can be trusted and equip them for the task of ministry. Don't abandon them, but empower and enable them. Share the load.

"If you do this," declares Jethro "then you will be able to endure, and all these people will go to their home in peace."

It was good advice then. It is good advice now. A community well ordered to carry out its shared ministry will not only endure, but it will thrive. Further, the well being of the community will not depend up the superhuman efforts of one person, but, rather, upon the unending and diverse contributions of all who belong to the body.

One of my favorite words of wisdom on this subject comes from Mother Theresa:

We must not think that our love has to be extraordinary. But we do need to love without getting tired. How does a lamp burn? Through the continuous input of small drops of oil. These drops are the small things of daily life: faithfulness, small words of kindness, a thought for others, our way of being quiet, of looking, of speaking, and of acting. They are the true drops of love that keep our lives and relationships burning like a lively flame.

The gifts of the pastor can be magnified a hundred or even a thousand times when they are offered freely and lovingly in a community that joins

joyfully in the task of ministry. But they will sputter and burn dim if they are not replenished by a community that is empowered to give as well as receive.

Luke's Gospel also contributes to our perspective in a slightly different way. If Exodus focuses upon organizing for ministry, Luke focuses on the task of ministry itself.

There's a small caveat in the first verse of the passage we read a few minutes ago that we sometimes overlook. Jesus sends the seventy to the places he intends to visit. The disciples are dispatched two by two ahead of Jesus to prepare the way for his coming. Jesus recognizes that this path-making is not going to be easy work. He tells the disciples, "I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves." Think about that image for a minute. It's pretty dramatic, isn't it?

Yet, even in the midst of wolves, there will be those persons who catch a glimpse of what is coming, of what God has in mind, and who will be prepared to welcome the ones who bring that news. Stay with those folks, Jesus counsels. Don't flit from place to place. And most of all, do not invest yourselves in places where you are not welcome, out of some misguided sense of duty. The task is too important, the role too urgent to waste precious time and energy where it will do no good. Strategize. Determine together where your efforts will bear fruit and invest yourselves without reserve in those places. Don't count on what you bring with you to sustain you, but rely on those to whom you are sent to see you through. That way you will know how much you need them and they

will know how important they are to you.

There are times in ministry when we work much too long and hard on side issues. There are times when we get distracted by our own needs, interests and agendas. There are times when we feel the challenge of trying to fix things that probably don't need to be repaired. It is essential, if pastor and people are going to persevere, growing in grace along the way, that both remember what they are sent into the world to do—they are to be about the business of preparing the way for Christ. They are to be engaged in those ministries that will pave the way in the hearts of human beings for the radical agenda of God's reign to be received. Can there be any task more important than that?

Hope is easy at the beginning of a relationship. The trick is to keep that hope alive each day that follows in order that both pastor and people might be nourished by it. The wonderful thing about hope is that it does not require that the circumstances surrounding it be easy, or that all the wolves be banished. When it is present in the heart of a community that has ordered itself for ministry and understands its purpose, hope only requires that we surrender ourselves anew to it each day.

Novelist Edith Wharton once wrote what it takes to stay alive in the midst of all of life's challenges. Listen to what she said:

In spite of illness, in spite even of the archenemy sorrow, one can remain alive long past the usual date of disintegration if one is unafraid of change, insatiable in

intellectual curiosity, interested in big things, and happy in small ways.

I heard a story some years ago that I almost hesitate to share. It has made the ministerial rounds and may be a bit on the corny side, but I think it says something important for us to hear today. It concerned a woman who was close to death after a long illness. She summoned her pastor and to convey to him her dying wish. She wanted him to promise that at her calling hours he would place a dinner fork in her folded hands and stand beside her casket to explain to everyone who asked why it was there.

“Perhaps, then” he offered, “you had best explain it to me first.”

“Pastor, you know how I loved the church suppers, don't you.”

“I can't remember you missing one.”

“Do you remember my favorite part?”

“Seems to me you had a particular fondness for the desserts” he smiled.

“How observant of you to notice” she replied. “My favorite moment was always when they would announce, ‘save your forks for dessert.’ I loved that strawberry shortcake, or cherry pie, or icecream. Now do you understand what I want you to say?”

“Help me just a bit more” the pastor answered.

“Just tell them ‘She's saving her fork because she knows the best part is yet to come!’”

My prayer for you, Larry, and for you, colleagues, and community members of the First Parish Church, is that you will know each day of your ministry together that the best part is yet to come.

Amen.