

20th Anniversary – February 11, 2018

Senior Pastor Dr. George C. Anderson of Second Presbyterian Church/Roanoke



Guest Preacher:

Dr. Daniel “Danny” W. Massie, dear friend and mentor of Dr. George Anderson, came to take part as the guest preacher on this special occasion. Having served as associate pastor at Dr. Massie’s church in Kingsport, TN, Dr. Anderson maintained a close relationship with his former head of staff. Dr. Massie is a native of Mississippi, and a graduate of Belhaven University and Union Presbyterian Seminary. He himself has served congregations in Mississippi, Louisiana, Virginia, Tennessee, and South Carolina. In his retirement, he is currently serving as interim pastor at Mount Pleasant Presbyterian Church in Mount Pleasant, SC. His message this Anniversary Sunday follows:

THE GOSPEL: ITS PEDDLERS, PREACHERS AND PRACTITIONERS

Isaiah 52:7-10; II Corinthians 4:1-15

I am so honored and appreciative of your gracious invitation to join you in celebrating twenty years of ministry with George Anderson my friend, my colleague, and a fellow minister who exemplifies in so many ways what the gospel ministry can and certainly ought to be. We shared only a few years on staff together in Kingsport, Tennessee but have remained close over the intervening years. And I treasure our friendship with George and Millie – and their families.

As I reflected on what to say on this happy and significant day in the life of the Andersons and this church, the first text that came to mind, was one first stated poetically by the prophet Isaiah and later was used by Paul in Romans 15 in praise of those who proclaim the gospel, and subsequently over the generations has been engraved on marble monuments and in sacred music: “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation and who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns.’”

Well, let me just say that I have been on the mountain with your pastor, usually as part of a youth ski trip when serving together. And what is more, I have had the occasion to see his feet when they were being extracted from ski boots or running shoes. I would not describe them as beautiful and am not sure that in a literal sense they are what Isaiah or the Apostle Paul had in mind!

So I decided instead to focus on one of today’s lectionary passages, though I have expanded it somewhat. The New Testament passage from II Corinthians is an insightful and revealing reflection on the vocation of the ministry of the gospel. This section on the work of ministry is the longest passage in the entire book around a single theme. That theme being the ministry of the word. It starts in chapter 2

where Paul speaks of some nefarious and false preachers whom he labels “peddlers of God’s word.” These people stand in stark contrast to ministers who were faithful and commissioned in the service of and the preaching of the gospel.

Now let me point out that while I am applying this passage to the life and work of your minister (or all of them), the passage relates to all of us who are followers of Christ and have been entrusted with the “ministry of reconciliation” mentioned in the following chapter (5:18). These words are not intended for professional clergy alone but for all commissioned to preach and practice the gospel. Notice that Paul consistently uses plural pronouns in discussing Christian ministry – “we, us, our.” He knew full well that the ministry of the word was a shared privilege and responsibility in the church. Now of all the churches founded by the Apostle Paul the Corinthian Church was perhaps the most troubling, the most demanding, and the most conflicted. We know that Paul had written them at least four times trying to correct, advise and encourage them. The two lengthy letters still preserved we call First and Second Corinthians but there are two others alluded to, one before and one after our “I Corinthians.”

Among the problems in the Corinthians church were divisions and disagreements within the congregation, lawsuits among the members, questionable moral standards, discrimination against the poorer and less gifted members, doubts about some core doctrines like whether there would be a resurrection for believers after death.

There were cultural differences between those from the North of Greece and those from the South. Though the church was still in its infancy when this letter was written around 56 or 57 A.D., there was even a divide between the older and newer members of the church, the newer ones being more critical of Paul’s authority and his theology. Some of them preferred Apollos and Cephas. There were disagreements over what Christians could eat or drink, over the extent of love and forgiveness within the church. There was greed and deceit present within the body. There was jealousy and pride attached to spiritual gifts. Though you may recognize some of those issues as somewhat familiar, you would have to agree that in contrast to First church Corinth, Second Church Roanoke is a veritable paradise! But if all these problems were not enough to drive a preacher to distraction, the conflicts had become quite personal because the church had clearly raised some complaints about Paul’s own ministry and his apostolic leadership.

While we may wish we had those two missing letters from Paul to Corinth that could possibly increase our understanding of the situation there, we know from Paul’s two existing letters what many of the concerns, decisions and complaints were all about. Clearly the honeymoon between Paul and this church he had founded were over after a number of years.

And so it is that in our passage this morning Paul is defending the gospel ministry, his own and others, and any ministry that is faithful, valid, and Godly. The ministry Paul is defending and encouraging is markedly different from what went on falsely in the name of ministry. So in a sense, looking at Paul’s defense of his own and others’ work, he helps to distinguish between a genuine ministry of the word and a corrupt one, between a faithful and a fraudulent servant of the gospel.

To begin with, Paul uses an interesting phrase early on in this treatise on the ministry work at the beginning in chapter 2. He writes: “For we are not peddlers of God’s word like so many, but in Christ we speak as persons of sincerity.” (2:17) When you think of a “peddler of God’s word” what image comes to your mind? I think of some Charlatan, floppy bible in hand, standing on the street corner or

behind a plexiglass podium on late night television, hawking his wares and making promises he can't deliver or issuing threats beyond his pay grade. And all of this is a shady and disingenuous effort to promote himself, advance his own interests and causes and distort the word of God to serve himself. He presents the gospel as a magical elixir good for humps, mumps, and bumps and making childbirth a pleasure! The contrast is clear. A true minister in sincerity uses the word in service of God and not of self.

“For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake.” (4:5). True ministry is not about me or us. It is about him – and for his sake we are slaves/servants of others. So to begin with, commendable ministry which honors God and best serves Jesus Christ is sincere and self-less.

Secondly, a ministry worthy of our admiration and emulation is honest and forthright and has spiritual integrity for it accurately presents and explains the Word of God. As Paul will later write to young Timothy as he begins his ministry. “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling in word of truth.” (II Tim 2:15). Since Paul has undoubtedly been accused by his detractors of distorting or perverting the Word of God he strongly takes exception to that insinuation or accusation throughout this treatise on ministry, he writes: “We refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's Word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God. (4:2).

Of course, what George and every other minister of the Word realizes is that the gospel, rightly understood and proclaimed, can be abrasive, offensive, and unwelcomed by those who hear it. The gospel was never intended only to comfort the afflicted but also to afflict the comfortable. Did you notice that Paul's intent in preaching was to “proclaim Jesus as Lord.” “Ah yes, there's the rub,” as the bard might say.

To preach Jesus a savior is appealing and popular and can win a preacher much acclaim from all who need a Savior. But to preach Jesus as Lord can get a preacher into serious trouble with those resistant to his Lordship and unwilling to surrender control of their finances, their politics, their priorities and their passions. And so for Paul, for George, for you or me, if we don't occasionally offend someone then frankly we are not doing our job. We are saying what people want to hear or love to hear but not necessarily what they need to hear if they are to be transformed as well as redeemed.

Not only are commendable preachers sincere and selfless, and not only are they honest and forthright when it comes to the Word of God, but they are vulnerable personally and willing for the sake of Jesus and his gospel, to bear any suffering or pain or indignity that might derive from their ministry.

This was certainly the case for the Apostle Paul. And I am not referring alone to the physical dangers and abuses that he endured and which he catalogues later in chapter 11. There were numerous imprisonments, countless beatings with rods and whips, stoned at least once and three shipwrecks. He had suffered dangers from rivers and robbers, from Jews and Gentiles alike, dangers at sea, dangers in both the city and the wilderness. He had battled sleeplessness, hunger, cold and exposure.

But in addition to those physical pains, he had also experienced the pressures, the anxieties, the mental and emotional strain, the felt weakness and inadequacies that come with serving churches and

dealing with difficult situations and with people opposed to your work or your theology, or your authority. And Paul had all of this in spades in this conflicted church in Corinth.

But Paul knew, as any pastor worth his salt must come to know if he was to be effective, that his strength and his hope and his confidence in the future centered in his Lord and not himself. He knew full well that while faithful workers in Christ carry a precious treasure in the gospel, they themselves are only fragile jars of clay, subject to all the mental and emotional struggles that come with serving God and neighbor. How does he put it? “We are afflicted in every way but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.” (4:8-9). And for what purpose? “So that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.” (4:10). That is why, despite the trials and tribulations of pastoral ministry, Paul says twice in chapter 4 (1, 16) that “we do not lose heart.” So long as our ministry focuses on following Christ who suffered with and for us and being servants to others, any pain or distress can be used of God to share the gospel.

So faithful and commendable ministers of the Word not only proclaim the gospel, but they are practitioners of it in their daily walk and work. And their openness and vulnerability invite their colleagues and parishioners to struggle with them and discover with them the holy and blessed things of eternal dimensions.

And one of the things I and so many of you, I am sure, have appreciated about George Anderson’s preaching and his living is that he is vulnerable and open. He invites you in to share with him in the noble task of listening for God’s voice and seeking to understand the mind and meaning of Jesus Christ for our day. He is not afraid to share his own questions and struggles. What you see in George is what you get. He is not unlike Nathaniel of old of whom Jesus was moved to say, “Here is one in whom there is no guile.” (John 1:47).

In the current issue of “The Christian Century” (Jan. 31, 2018) Craig Barnes of Princeton Seminary reflects on how often servants of God in days biblical or current may suffer many indignities and trials but in so doing they are used of God in the holy drama of redemption. They bear in their bodies the life of Jesus as they dare to practice what we preach, not perfectly to be sure, but sufficiently to enable their hearers and their observers to see and hear Jesus.

The traits Paul commends to those who would serve as ministers of Jesus Christ are certainly ones visible in your pastor of the past twenty years. Sincerity and selflessness, integrity of preaching and teaching in honesty and candor, and a vulnerable spirit and an openness about his own struggles, his willingness to practice the gospel he preaches, his humble recognition of his own fragility and flaws, his hope in God for himself, his family and friends, his church and his world.

What Second Presbyterian Church and George Anderson have together in your shared ministry of twenty years is somewhat rare and a wonderful thing in our day and in the church today. The danger is that you may come to take each other for granted and forget the love you had at first, as did one of the seven churches in Revelation.

As I began this message I said that the verse that came to my mind initially in thinking of this occasion was: “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the one who announces peace, also brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion “Your God reigns.”“

I teased that often taken literally, the prophet surely could not have been thinking of George and his feet. However, if taken metaphorically the words of the prophet and later the apostle are a fitting description of a ministry like George's. For what the prophet is imagining in poetic language is an approaching runner coming over the mountain bringing the people good news of peace and salvation and deliverance and the assurance that "God reigns."

George has been bringing this good news to folks throughout his ministry and for twenty years here at Second. It is certainly a blessing worthy of our recognition and celebration.

Craig Barnes closes the article previously mentioned by writing: "When a congregation and its pastor are in love, they can do a world of good, and that gets them to the dreams of God."

Together you and your pastor have done a world of good for this community and for the larger church given its challenges today. And given your continuing love for one another, I fully expect this good work to continue for the glory of God and the good of the Kingdom.