

## What Does a Minister Expect of a Congregation?

Exodus 18:13-23

Ephesians 4:1-7; 11-16

“I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

What does a minister expect of a congregation? A few months after I was ordained, a friend sent me the reflections of a Catholic priest after 27 years in the ministry, reflections that once shaped my own expectations of church members and that now describe my experience of the ministry over four decades. “The ministry,” this priest wrote, “is giving communion to a dying person in a darkened hospital room at three o’clock in the morning, and then having a parishioner tell you the next day that he doesn’t think you are much of a Christian, and knowing that he may be right. The ministry is teaching children things they are not interested in and knowing that someday—maybe tomorrow—the whole course of their lives may depend upon their remembering what they were taught. The ministry is stating, as well as you are able, the magnificent, life-transforming message of the gospel, in countless numbers of sermons, and knowing that few lives are being transformed and many may not even be touched. The ministry is helping a young mother accept the death of her child, then going to a meeting of church members who are upset because there just doesn’t seem to be anyone to help. The ministry is sitting in endless, dull meetings, and offering Christ at the altar. The hours are long, the demands are frequently heavy, the results are often obscure, the critics are numerous and real achievement is rare.”

Every minister since Moses could have written those words about the experience of serving a congregation. But I think you are asking me to go beyond my experience of you and to speak about what I expect of you as followers of Jesus Christ and members of Christ’s church. In

order to answer that question, I must begin with a word of caution that has always disciplined my expectations of the congregations I have been privileged to serve. Come to think of it, my first expectation of you is that you also would take this word of caution to heart. It comes from a lecture delivered by Dietrich Bonhoeffer to seminarians in the Confessing Church's clandestine seminary before it was closed by the Nazis. He says that "Innumerable times a whole Christian community has broken down because it had sprung from a wish dream." In other words, one of the most pernicious things you can do is damn the church you have been given by God on the basis of an ideal church you carry around in your head. Bonhoeffer goes on: "[The one] who loves his dream of a community more than the Christian community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter, even though [her] personal intentions may be ever so honest and earnest and sacrificial."

Because we have been *given to each other by God* to be the one body of Christ in the world and for the world, Bonhoeffer cautions us to enter into our common life "*not as demanders but as thankful recipients*. We thank God for what He has done for us. We thank God for giving us [brothers and sisters] who live by His call, by His forgiveness, and His promises. We do not complain of what God does not give us; we rather thank God for what he does give us daily."

Let me hasten to add that Bonhoeffer was saying these words to future ministers because, believe it or not, ministers can be just as critical of their congregations as members are critical of their ministers. Now, does this mean I expect you never to be critical of the church God has given you? Heavens no! That would be me imposing my wish dream on the church God has given me. Rather as *thankful recipients* of the gift of this community, I expect you to offer your critique "with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love,

making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

Given this ground rule, the expectations that follow, some also borrowed from Bonhoeffer’s little book of lectures entitled *Life Together*, are deceptively simple and straightforward. My first is the expectation that you will listen. Bonhoeffer says listening is the first service we owe to others and, let me add, the first service we owe to God. I expect you to enter this sanctuary week after week in an attitude of expectant listening. “Listen for God’s word,” we say before we read the lessons. It is what I have spent the week doing on your behalf and with you in mind. For one brief hour I expect you to listen not to me but for the movement of God’s Spirit as in words and music, in prayer and silence, the Spirit attempts to pry open your mind and your life to God’s leading. Discipleship begins with the discipline of listening for God’s address as if the future promised by God is the future you mean to dare in the world.

But of equal importance is the discipline of listening to the other—be that other in this congregation or a stranger you meet along the way. Listening involves creating a space where the other can be himself, can be herself, without fear. It is a sort of hospitality that invites the other in and makes room for the other to try out the person she is becoming. Listening, of course, takes time and requires you to relinquish control. “Anyone who thinks that his time is too valuable to spend keeping quiet will eventually have no time for God and [the other], but only for himself, only for herself and her own follies.” I expect you to listen for God and to one another “with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

The second borrowed expectation has to do with expecting you to be helpful—or as my mother has said to me countless times with no small degree of frustration in her voice, “See what there is to do and do it!” Or better, ask what God is doing in the world to make and keep human

life human; then roll up your sleeves! The implication is that being helpful involves taking the initiative rather than waiting to be asked. It also involves, once again, being generous with your time and your resources, giving yourself away because your life is not your own to do with as you please. I think of the simple assistance offered in what might seem like trifling matters—a table cleared at brunch, an arm extended to steady weak knees. Then there are mattresses delivered on a Saturday to row houses in West Philadelphia so that a family can take turns getting a good night's sleep or Sloppy Joes served at Our Brother's Place because you offered to help before the Hunger Committee had to beg. Not what you planned to do with your precious day off, unless part of your understanding of discipleship is the act of being helpful, even generous with your life. Trifling? Yes, says Bonhoeffer, but when we allow our plans to be interrupted, "God will be constantly crossing our paths and canceling our plans by sending us people with claims and petitions...."

It almost goes without saying that in order to be helpful, you must show up—make the hard choice to be here instead of all the other places you or your children could be—and then pitch in "with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

A third expectation that is not borrowed from Bonhoeffer but from Jesus is that you forgive one another as Christ has forgiven you. Or put more broadly, that you forgive the church, the community, for being a gathering of simply human beings who inevitably will disappoint you. You were sick and no one visited you; you were left out and no one noticed; you disagreed with the decision made by the elders and no one else agreed with you; you do not like the minister and she will not leave. The church—its minister, its leaders, its members—screw up! The church is human and guess what? So are you! Who knows how you have let someone

else down in this community, someone who has quietly forgiven you and moved on. Forgiveness, as we said a few weeks ago, means bearing another's brokenness without vindictiveness because your own brokenness is known.

Sometimes I think ministers move around so much because they cannot bear the accumulation of little failures, the unforgiven incidents of letting people down. Better to move on and begin with a clean slate unless, unless you have the great good fortune to serve a community that forgives one another—even the minister!--because each one knows the underserved gift of being forgiven “with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

The fourth expectation is one that I learned to practice early on in ministry because of my office. Bonhoeffer calls it “the ministry of holding one's tongue.” God knows I have practiced this with some of you as you have with me! Bonhoeffer says that in the community of faith each individual is prohibited from saying much that occurs to him, to her. A personal word of advice and guidance is one thing, but “to speak about a brother [or a sister] covertly is forbidden, even under the cloak of help and good will.” Why? Because wagging tongues create mischief within community.

Put positively, “Where this discipline of the tongue is practiced right from the beginning, each individual will make a matchless discovery. He will be able to cease from constantly scrutinizing the other person, judging him, condemning him, doing violence to him as a person. Now [she] can allow a brother [a sister] to exist as a completely free person, as God made him to be....Strong and weak, wise and foolish, gifted or ungifted, pious or impious, the diverse individuals in the community are no longer incentives for talking and judging and condemning, and thus excuses for self-justification. They are rather cause for rejoicing in one another and

serving one another.” So in the fourth place I expect you to exercise the ministry of holding your tongues “with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

When I set out to answer this question, I thought my expectations would have more to do with the church’s prophetic action in the world and perhaps, if I have another go at this, I will offer a few more revolutionary expectations of us as we bear witness to the gospel beyond these doors. But sometimes it is good to begin with trying out the gospel on one another. A friend of mine wrote that “God throws us together in the church and says, in essence, ‘Here is where you get a chance to learn how to live with other people, to forgive, and even come to see God in one another. After all, if you can find God here, you can find God anywhere....If we can practice the art of reconciliation long enough with another in church, then we have a chance to let reconciliation mark our relationships with others outside the church as well. [For t]he church, like the family, is the place where we learn to live with people we are stuck with. And when we stick together, it is a living reminder of the God who is stuck with all of us.” Bottom line, I expect you to love the church God has given you “with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”