

“The Noble Task”

1 Peter 5:1-11

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

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Today is an important and exciting day in the life of our church. Not only will we be celebrating the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, in a few minutes we will be ordaining and installing elders who will serve for the coming year. So I thought this would be a good time for us to talk about the important role of elder in the life of the church and the biblical basis for their work.

We find the origins of the office of elder in the Old Testament. In our reading from Numbers we find God instructing Moses to appoint elders from among the people to help lead the Israelites. God tells Moses, “Go get 70 people that are already leaders and I will put some of my Spirit on them so they can bear the burden of leadership with you.”

We find the same principle in the New Testament. In the Apostle Paul's letter to Titus He says, “This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you.” In other words, he gave Titus the job of identifying people to serve as elders to bear the burden of the people. It's important for us to see that the elders are chosen from among the people. All elders – both ruling elders and pastors – are ordinary Christians, regular church members, who are called by God to the task of leading. That call to leadership comes through the whole congregation. Elders are elected by the people that they lead. You don't become an elder just because *you* feel called. You are selected because the *congregation* determines that God is calling you. Notice that in our Old Testament reading two guys that were selected, Eldad and Medad, didn't show up for their ordination. Yet they began to prophesy back in the camp. The call of God can be resisted but it can't be avoided.

In the Presbyterian Church, the office of elder is the highest office and the most

important job. Does that surprise you? There are only two offices in the Presbyterian Church. One is the office of deacon and the other is elder or presbyter. That's where we get the name “Presbyterian,” which means “governed by elders.” Now you may be thinking, “what about ministers? Aren't they officers of the church?” The answer is yes we are. But we are considered elders as well. Our church government makes a distinction between Ruling Elders and pastors, who are also called Teaching Elders, but the distinction is only in the emphasis of the work.

As the name implies, the primary role of a Teaching Elder is to teach and preach, with some administration and pastoral care. Ruling Elders are primarily charged with administration as well as teaching, pastoral care, and even preaching. Both types of elder have the same responsibilities but with a different order of priority.

In our Scripture passage from 1 Peter 5 we find the Apostle Peter giving some guidance on the office of elder. The first thing we need to see is that the supreme example for elders to imitate is Jesus himself. He says, “shepherd the flock of God that is among you.” Elders are to be shepherds but they work for the Chief Shepherd, Jesus. The way elders are to lead is “as God would have you.” They are sharing in Jesus' work here.

Elders must always be seeking the will of God for the congregation. Peter then says, “not for shameful gain, but eagerly.” Nobody should serve in church office in order to profit from it. Also, nobody should serve who doesn't want to serve. Elders should serve “eagerly.” That means being eager to carry out the tasks that are required. They are to exercise “oversight” but not in a way that forces people to do what they want. Peter says, “not domineering over those in your

charge. Again, the model is Christ who doesn't force us to believe in him or follow him.

Then in verse 3 we find the key. Peter charges us to be examples to the flock. It's well known that Samuel Clemens, also known as Mark Twain, did not consider himself a Christian. He was often outspoken about it as well, and the blame goes to church leaders. Growing up in a Presbyterian church, he knew elders and deacons who owned slaves and abused them. He heard men speak piously in church on Sunday but use foul language and practice dishonesty during the week. He listened to ministers use the Bible to justify slavery. The fact is that the elders were examples to the flock but they weren't godly examples. Elders are to reflect Christ to their congregation and to the community.

But it's not just elders. In fact, as we see beginning in verse 5, Peter shows us that what is required of elders is actually required of all Christians. He says, "Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another." This kind of humility is not about beating yourself up. It's about recognizing your standing before God and his power to save you. That's why he says for us to cast all our anxieties on him.

The last part of this passage gives us a warning and some positive instructions for action. We are warned that the devil prowls around trying to make us fall. Our response, then, is to "resist him." How do we resist? By being firm in our faith. One of the tasks of elders is to help us to grow in that faith and knowledge of Christ. We are to be alert and watchful. Serving Christ is a full-time job. It may mean that we suffer. Jesus warned us that the world hated him first and as his followers the world will hate us, too. But Peter reminds us that we are not alone in that suffering and that "the God of all grace...will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you."

So elders are to lead, but they are to lead by example. They are to be humble, firm in their faith, able to teach the faith of the Church and able to love the people of the church. In return, we need to support them in that and respect their work. 1 Timothy 3:1 says, "The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task." Indeed, to serve as an elder in Christ's church is a noble task.

Amen