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## HISTORICAL SERIES, 6

### Christian Ministry – A High-risk Calling

**J. Robert Jacobson**

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*(Editor's Note: During the time of his ordained ministry in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada the Rev. J. Robert Jacobson served as the first bishop of the Synod of Alberta and the Territories from 1986 to 1994. This sermon was preached at the Convocation of Newman Theological College in 1991 and in a modified form at a Bishop's Study conference in 1994.)*

#### **Text: 2 Corinthians 3:5-6**

To ask a bishop to address a Convocation is to guarantee that it will be set in the context of the painful struggles involved in the Church's call to be faithful to our Lord Jesus Christ. It is probably also safe to assume that the speaker is expected to be battle-scarred but not broken; one who carries in his body the death of Christ so that the life of Christ may be manifested in the Church for the world; a survivor who through grace alone has managed at one and the same time to be the off-scouring of the earth and a sign of the world's best and brightest hope; someone who in the highest degree is unlikely to float off into theological abstractions and clever mind-games.

I hope so, because that is what you have today.

First, may I congratulate you graduates on having come to the point where you are able to offer some significant ministry to the Church and the world through Christ. You have all invested much time and effort in equipping yourselves for ministry, and today we recognize and celebrate your fine achievement of faith thus far.

If what I have to say to you sounds stern and harsh at points, it is only because many of you have now arrived at the very juncture where Jesus' disciples stood when he urged them to "sit down and count the cost, to see whether [they] had enough to complete [the task]" (Luke 14:28). Far from taking anything away from your achievements to date, nothing I have to say would make any sense without them.

Most of you are surely aware that Christian ministry is a high-risk calling. But I wonder if anyone at this stage of preparation can truly appreciate how high-risk it is, or what a colossal impact entering into that high-risk zone will have on your personal life, right down to the core. It is a good idea to look ahead, as our Lord advises, and to count the cost; but in spite of our most careful projections and deliberate estimates, we will almost all experience a cost overrun of quite staggering proportions as we fulfill the ministry we have received from the Lord Jesus (Acts 20:24). And, I hasten to add, the highest joys through the deepest sorrows, and life most abundant in taking up our cross.

What makes Christian ministry such a high-risk calling?

For one thing, the moment you are entrusted with a public ministry on behalf of Christ and his Church you must see yourself and everything you do and say as representing Christ and his Church. Why? Because – and to a degree you can scarcely appreciate at this point – everybody else, including God, does so, whether you like it or not. This is actually a gift that enables you to do immeasurable good for people on behalf of Christ and his Church, but it also empowers you to do them more harm than you can imagine. Ministry is a sacred trust in the most literal sense of those words. So much is at stake for people in it.

Jesus was making just this point to the disciples when Peter, cringing at the implications of Jesus' words, asked him point-blank whether he was saying this for the benefit of the apostles or of everyone. We need to hear Jesus' unequivocal answer, for the simple reason that it had better register with us *before* we get into ministry, not afterwards. Jesus' answer is, "I'm saying this for *your* benefit because you are the ones to whom I am committing the task of keeping the rest of my household well fed and cared for. So many people are blessed when you are faithful, and so many people suffer when you are not. I am holding you especially accountable to me. Because I have entrusted so much to you, I require that much more from you" (Luke 12:41-42 in paraphrase). These are Jesus' words to his ministers.

These words, of course, contain an equal amount of promise and of threat for the very reason that they are one way of describing the sacred trust of Christian ministry. Faithful stewards have nothing less than the very Bread of Heaven in its varied forms to share with

hungry people, an awesome empowerment in the hands of a faithful minister to give and sustain the life of God in human beings. There is no more exquisite form of blessing than this, for the people and for us. But if we betray this sacred trust by redirecting the divine resources away from those for whom they are intended and toward our own narrow self-interest ... well, human language fails even Jesus in describing the suffering and horrors to which that can lead, for the people and for us.

Paul underscores in Acts 20 the subtleness with which ministers can experience over time a gradual shift from faithfulness to unfaithfulness in the exercise of their stewardship from God. As in Jesus' story to Peter, here too the nub of the problem is defined as a movement from a Christ-centred and Christ-shaped ministry to a ministry that slowly comes to centre on the minister's desire for personal gratification. That can twist everything. "Some even from among our own group (whom the Holy Spirit has made guardians of the flock) will come distorting the truth in order to entice the disciples to follow *them*" (Acts 20:30).

A high-risk calling, indeed – the risk of failure and becoming a source of terrible damage in the course of our ministry! No wonder Ambrose was moved to say, *Mirum est, si sacerdos salvus est*. "It's a wonder any priest is saved."

What else makes Christian ministry such a high-risk calling? It has always been true, but today it is truer than ever: Anyone who thinks that it is a small private matter for a Christian minister to misbehave a little on the side, or that the minister's private life is no one else's business, is out of touch with reality. You need to know this before you start. Nothing destroys faith faster in people or disillusion them more irreparably about what the Church has to offer, than the discovery that the minister they thought they could surely trust has betrayed them. God's people may not have the right to know every detail of your private life and mine, but they do have the right to assume that if they did know it there would be no surprises revealed, nothing incompatible with our public ministry. Why? Because wherever people cannot make that assumption, ministry stops dead! Just try to minister effectively to someone who, justly or unjustly, suspects you of being incongruent, one thing in public and something else in private. You haven't got a hope! I have seen the ministry of one pastor, who had slowly won the confidence

of a distrustful people, set back overnight by the news of a beloved neighbouring pastor's breach of his people's trust. The faithful pastor's ministry was badly hurt by the suspicion that he might be as two-faced as his colleague.

Are you ready to accept that burden as a Christian minister, the burden of committing yourself to congruity in your public and your private life, so that in fact you are living but one life, a life *coram deo* ("before the face of God")? Can you furthermore accept the burden of knowing that the integrity of your own ministry is subject to be torn to shreds in the eyes of some people by the behaviour of colleagues who abuse the sacred trust which all Christian ministers hold? And above all, can you assume the burden of knowing that as a Christian minister your conduct categorically cannot be just a private matter? More than you can imagine, you hold the credibility of the ministry of your colleagues in your hands. There is no more delicate way of saying it. It's part of what it means to count the cost of discipleship at this juncture. Please count it now.

Of course, thank God, this same principle works in reverse. People who experience Christ in you will come to expect to experience Christ in your colleagues as well. What a blessing you give them when this happens! And you will be amazed constantly at the number of people who are still prepared to trust you without knowing anything more about you than the fact that you are a minister of Jesus Christ. This is probably because one of your colleagues somewhere else has served them so faithfully in Christ's love. Yes, this treasure still exists, but every minister will tell you that it has been tragically depleted in recent years, with countless opportunities to be the Gospel for people lost simply because so many people are scandalized by stories or experiences of ministers who have betrayed their sacred trust. Cynicism abounds, and the sad truth is that it plagues those who deserve it least as much as those who deserve it most.

In public ministry at any level you enter upon a high-risk calling. The stakes are high. Human lives hang in the balance. You are subject from now on to a greatly heightened responsibility for the broad impact of your own words and actions on the lives of others and on the very mission and Church of Jesus Christ. There's no way around it. It's the agony and ecstasy of ministry. It is most appealing, and most daunting. "Who is sufficient for these things?" asked Paul (2

Corinthians 2:16). And he was talking about the things of Christian ministry! Who, indeed?!

Don't expect a cheap and easy answer from me! Paul's answer is neither cheap nor easy: "Our sufficiency is from God who has qualified us to be ministers of a New Covenant," he says (2 Corinthians 3:5-6). Believe me, any minister striving to be faithful these days clings to the truth of these words as to a life-raft in deep and troubled waters. "Our sufficiency is from God who gives us what it takes to serve his purposes in bringing people back to himself through Jesus' death and resurrection."

To be sure, God calls and uses all kinds of people in ministry. But those to whom public ministry is entrusted, whether in its ordained or in its non-ordained forms, all share a few things in common. All are called to demonstrate an adequate supply of a few essential qualities, precisely because it is a public ministry and so much hinges on how they exercise it. A few years ago I did a careful study of the list of qualities found in the Pastoral Epistles (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus) and compared them with the qualities which Jesus sought to establish in his disciples and which St. Paul stressed at length in his primary epistles. They are virtually identical. Their absence in any persons presenting themselves for public ministry is reason enough to withhold the laying-on of hands, whatever other gifts these people may have. Otherwise the blame for the harm they do to themselves and to others falls as much on a careless Church as it does on them (1 Timothy 5:22).

What, then, does the Church require and what do people have a right to expect of those who present themselves for public ministry of any kind? "A firm grasp of the Word," to cite Titus 1:9, and a character above public reproach; a history of faithful and responsible family life and a gentle spirit; a personality free of addictions to things like wine, money, or sex, and a long track record as Christians to show that they can endure the trials and temptations of our life in Jesus Christ. If any one of these areas gets out of control in a minister's life, the damage to self and others and to the credibility of the Gospel can be massive.

So if you have all that, you are "sufficient for these things?" Only if you hold it all not as a personal possession or attainment, but as a gift from God renewed moment by moment by the Holy Spirit at the foot of the cross and in the presence of the risen Christ.

Do you have a firm grasp of the Word? *Is it not because the Word has a firm grasp of you?* Do you have a character above public reproach? *Is it not because you simply cannot imagine hurting or abusing others when you feel so cherished and honoured by our Lord yourself?* Are you free of serious addictions? *Is it not because God has so filled you with his beauty and life that you are spared the sick cravings of an empty heart?* Do you have a history of faithful and responsible family life? *How would that be possible without the blessing of Heaven and the gifts of the Spirit?* “What indeed do you have that you did not receive as a gift?” (1 Corinthians 4:7) There is no room to boast. If you are one of those whom God has equipped thus for public ministry, it is God’s achievement, not yours. The most you and I can claim is that we have sought as faithful disciples to receive rather than reject God’s gifts, but only God knows how much resistance he has had to overcome in any of us in the process.

And, friends, it gets tougher, not easier. Having some of the basics in place by God’s grace means just that, and no more. There is no guarantee to us any more than to the elders at Ephesus referred to in Acts 20 that the basics will *stay* in place. For us to be useful to God, he must put us in compromising circumstances up to the limit of our spiritual tolerance (1 Corinthians 10:13); but the moment we start trusting ourselves to make it through, the moment we presume that our track record proves that we cannot fall, we’re in danger. “Our sufficiency is from God” in every circumstance, always. It is only by looking to Jesus who created our faith in God’s love for us in the first place and who is committed to bringing it to its fullest expression in us – only by looking always to Jesus that we can finish the course set before us (Hebrews 12:1-2).

Now I want to turn that around. Because we look to Jesus and cling to him in all our trials, we *will* fulfill the ministry we receive from him despite the disappointments and heartaches we meet, despite the dangers from within and the dangers from without. “I am with you always,” he says to his public ministers. “Without me you can do nothing.” But we can do all things through Christ who gives us his strength (Matthew 28:20; John 15:5; cf. Philippians 4:13).

If I have felt compelled to focus today on the call of our Lord to count the cost entailed in faithful ministry in our time, and if I have moreover chosen to focus on only a part of that cost – the part connected with the public nature of our ministry – it is because the

Church has suffered much in recent times at the hands of those who have not counted that part. One contributing factor may well be that the ministry has been infected by some of the viruses of our age, like the *individualism* that discounts the importance of the effect of our conduct on the lives of others; or the *professionalism* that sees no need to harmonize our public and private life; or the various cults of *self-actualization* that defy the Gospel mystery of finding our life by losing it for Jesus' sake. Ministers who are badly infected by viruses such as these are a menace to the people entrusted to their care, to their colleagues in ministry, and to the credibility of the whole Church. Christian ministers are called to serve in Christ's way by Christ's power in the communion of the Church.

“Our sufficiency is from God.” Those Christian ministers who cling to God and serve each other well will continue to be a blessing in our time because God will continue to make them radiant sources of his saving love. I know, because God has given me the privilege of serving a remarkable body of such ministers, lay and ordained, who exercise the sacred trust they have received from the Lord Jesus with reverence, humility, gratitude and joy. They're not the ones that grab the headlines, unfortunately. But they offer their communities an experience of someone who has been sent by Jesus through his Church in response to their need. And when they are finished in one place and move on to the next, I know that they have exercised their sacred trust well when someone says, “How God has loved us through that man!” or, “She treated us as though we really matter!”

As you step into your various ministries and exercise them in Jesus' name, I pray that our Lord will be loving people well through *you* and giving them a sense of their worth in his eyes by the worth they have in yours.

May the peace of God which surpasses all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus! Amen.