

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
November 20, 2022

Led Into God's Presence

Hebrews 13:7-19

When you come into our church, you aren't just greeted by live people, but by dead ones as well. They aren't visibly standing before you, but they are present by name. Their names appear on the plaques that decorate one of the walls of our vestibule. These men and women are remembered for their faithful commitment to and generosity toward many aspects of our congregation's life and mission, such as worship, Christian education, music, buildings and grounds, or service to the community. The largest item on the wall contains the names of our church's deacons, some of whom are deceased. Even though they're no longer with us in this life the way they were before, we're still connected to them in Christian fellowship through Jesus the Son, and their example still guides us in our continuing journey of faith.

"Remember your leaders," begins today's Scripture passage. "Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith" (v. 7). According to the writer of Hebrews, there are many things about the congregation's deceased leaders that are worth emulating, in particular, their faith and the kind of lives it produced. Lives that were attentive and responsive to what God has said through the Son. Lives that were centered on Christ and his cross. Though these godly leaders may no longer be with them, Jesus still is. He's "the same yesterday and today and forever" (v. 8).

John Wesley was an eighteenth century pastor and evangelist. He and his brother Charles wrote several of the songs that are included in our hymnal. At Westminster Abbey in London, John's memorial marker bears the inscription: "God buries his workmen, but he carries on his work." I think that's part of what the writer of Hebrews was trying to convey to his hearers in this morning's text. Though many things may change in the life of the church, including many of the church's own people, the Lord himself is unchanging. That's why he needs to be the focal point, which means that a truly godly life is measured by how much it points away from itself to Jesus. As one pastor has put it, "Memories of godly lives help best when they turn us to the one who never needs to be replaced and who is permanently available to his people."¹

Remember that we, the people of God in Christ, are still on our journey of faith toward the heavenly destination that God has promised. And in order to persevere in faith we need not only the Christlike example provided by the deceased, whose names appear on vestibule plaques, but also the godly leadership and example of the living, who are still presently at our side in the life of the congregation, and who stand before us when we enter the church each Sunday.

In one respect, I mean that literally, especially when it comes to our deacons. It's no minor thing that once we've concluded our opening praise music, the first person you see up here isn't myself, but one of our congregation's ordained lay leaders, a man or woman called the deacon of the month. Now that doesn't mean he or she is honored with a prime parking space next to the church entrance, or some extra visibility and prominence here at the focal point of our sanctuary, the pulpit. It simply means that on each Sunday for that particular

month, this particular deacon has a sacred and significant responsibility for helping lead us into the presence of God. That's because Jesus' death for our sins has secured our forgiveness and restored our communion with God. We have access to the Father through the sacrifice of the Son. So as today's text says, "Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess his name" (v. 15).

Our deacons play a vital role in helping us offer this weekly sacrifice of praise. For instance, a deacon greets you and leads us through the sharing of our announcements and prayer requests. Then he or she does something especially significant by leading the call to worship, normally a passage from the book of Psalms, a text that summons us into God's presence so that we can offer God our praise and receive his word for our lives. After the call to worship, the deacon leads us in an opening prayer that acknowledges God's presence and calls upon him to be with us in our worship. Put all these pieces together and you can see how the deacon worship leader is charged with summing up the purpose of this gathering. He or she has the sacred responsibility to remind us of why we are here and what we're supposed to be doing in this assembly. Come and worship the Lord.

As I described the deacon's role in our worship service, you may have noticed that the word "lead" came up repeatedly. The deacon leads us into God's presence, leads us in sharing our joys and concerns, leads us in Scripture, leads us in prayer. When the deacon stands before us on Sunday morning, he or she is fulfilling a call to leadership. And that applies not only to worship, but to the other areas of deacon ministry as well. When it comes to caring for the people in the church, or sharing the gospel with believers and unbelievers, or ministering to financial and material needs, or cultivating the unity and health of the congregation, or consulting on the church's administrative matters, deacons are expected to serve as leaders. They're supposed to be out front, ahead of the congregation, helping chart the way for the fellowship as a whole in our journey of faith toward the fulfillment of God's purposes in Christ.

And deacons are supposed to be doing so in a way that models the servanthood of Christ. In other words, a deacon's life and ministry, inside the church and outside the church, should embody the self-giving, self-emptying, sacrificial love of Jesus that redeems, reconciles, and restores us to God and to one another. Now that doesn't mean there's no power and authority involved in the deacon's work. In fact, in today's text, the writer of Hebrews exhorts the members of the congregation to "obey your leaders and submit to their authority" (v. 17a). Though in this context, the term "leaders" probably isn't a reference to what we know as "deacons," the issue of authority still applies, as does Jesus' own teaching and example. For instance, when some of Jesus' own disciples were debating among themselves about who would occupy the places of authority in Christ's kingdom, Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:42-45).

Couple this with the story of how Jesus washed the feet of his own disciples, and we can see that for Jesus, the power is in the way that he acts without regard for matters of status and privilege. In other words, Jesus doesn't reject power. He just rejects the way that power is used to protect a place of privilege or to raise one's status. Power isn't to be used to protect ourselves, or exalt ourselves, or elevate ourselves. On the contrary, power is to be used to bless and to serve. As author Andy Crouch says, "Power is not the opposite of servanthood. Rather, servanthood, ensuring the flourishing of others, is the very purpose of power."²

We see this reflected in our passage from Hebrews. Right after exhorting the hearers to obey their leaders, the writer reminds them that these leaders “keep watch over you as those who must give an account” (v. 17b). The Greek word translated as “keep watch over” literally means “lose sleep over.” It captures and conveys the vigilance and alertness that leaders must maintain as they care for the flock. This means being on the lookout for things that might deceive believers, lead them astray, or hinder them from becoming who God intends them to be in Christ. The story is told about a man who observed a fellow driving a group of sheep across a field, beating the stick and urging them forward. The man said, “I thought shepherds led their sheep.” And the answer came back: “I’m not the shepherd; I’m the butcher.” Remember that deacons are called to be shepherds, to lead you toward well being, not drive you toward harm. A fundamental part of deacon ministry is to keep watch over your lives individually, and to look out for our life together as a congregation, ensuring that we stay faithful to the gospel, that we spread the good news of God’s kingdom, that we grow and mature spiritually, and that we flourish as a community of Christ’s people in our worship, our work, and our witness.

What’s more, each of our deacons is expected to carry out his or her ministry with a strong sense of accountability. Accountability to God, who has called them into this place of servant leadership, and empowers them for their work. And accountability to you the congregation, as you have affirmed them in their calling and have pledged your support for their ministry. Deacons realize that they must answer to God for how they use the power and authority entrusted to them. They feel deeply their responsibility to lead, and to lead wisely, faithfully, and lovingly. And in order for that to happen, the accountability needs to be mutual. So our deacons rightfully expect you to be responsive to their ministry, actively participating in the many forms of their work, so that they can flourish in what they’re doing as they help you flourish in what you’re doing. It’s no wonder that the writer of Hebrews tells the hearers to obey their leaders “so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you” (v. 17c).

Though he was addressing fellow members of the clergy, what German pastor Friedrich von Bodelschwingh once wrote applies to all leaders in a congregation, including deacons. He said:

I beg you, do not look upon [this parish] as a steppingstone, but rather say: Here I shall stay as long as it pleases God; if it be his will, until I die. Look upon every child, your confirmands, every member of the congregation as if you will have to give account for every soul on the day of the Lord Jesus. Every day commit all these human souls from the worst and the weakest of hands, namely, your own, into the best and strongest of hands. Then you will be able to carry on your ministry not only without care but also with joy overflowing and joyful hope.³

True, there’s a certain heaviness, a weight, to deacon ministry, considering the level of responsibility and accountability that comes with the call. But within that heaviness is also a certain joy. The joy that comes from helping shepherd the flock in ways that are deeply relational and personal. As one retired minister has put it, “We are *overseers*, not of an organization, but of souls.”⁴ So deacons are partners with me in leading our congregation, not primarily as a collection of programs, a network of committees, or a schedule of activities, but mainly as a community, a fellowship of live human beings, embodied souls, people loved and redeemed by God in Christ. As our deacons engage with you and you engage with our deacons, in the whole range of life experiences, relationships get formed and forged, and God bonds us to himself and to one another.

It’s no wonder, then, that today’s text from Hebrews ends with a request for prayer. The writer, speaking not only for himself but for the rest of the church’s leaders, asks the community to remember them in prayer, that they will continue to lead lives that provide a faithful, Christlike example to the congregation. Then the writer makes the prayer request

even more personal, asking the congregation to pray that he will soon be reunited with them in person, after being temporarily separated from them by travel. What matters is that they, like us, be present to one another, in the presence of God, offering a sacrifice of praise. That praise includes worshiping, making the gospel known in the world, caring for the needy, serving the community, and sharing generously with one another. In all these ways, our deacons offer their lives to God, and help us do the same, both inside and outside the walls of the church.

¹ Ray C. Stedman, *Hebrews*. The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downer's Grove: IVP Academic, 1992) 153.

² Andy Crouch, "It's Time to Talk About Power." Christianity Today website. October 1, 2013. Accessed August 13, 2014 <<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2013/october/andy-crouch-its-time-to-talk-about-power.html?paging=off>>.

³ Friedrich von Bodelschwingh, *Leadership*, Vol. 9, No. 4.

⁴ Lee Eclov, "Pastoral Accounting." Preaching Today. <https://www.preachingtoday.com/your-soul/preacher-devotions/pastoral-accounting.html>.