



Dr. James C. Howell
Ephesians 4:1-16, John 21:15-19
July 27, 2008

I hope you will pardon me if I don't feel all that small this morning. What I feel instead in my heart is a rather large joy. It's the kind of joy of...let me think how to describe this. My father-in-law is here this morning, and I remember when Lisa and I were first married, the family would get together, and I was always struck by how very important it was to him for the entire family to be together. And I thought, "It ought to be just good enough that Lisa and I have shown up." But he always wanted to have the entire family together. I now am driving my adult children crazy because I want to have the entire family together. Today I feel the joy of a father, a godfather, perhaps, for having the family together. We have five new ministers, that's a lot to add in one full swoop, and they are wonderful, and having them is wonderful, and this day is wonderful because, not only are they here, but their families are here with us. They are participating in the service. Think of that. Think of what it must be like for Christy and for Courtney and for Ned. They've not been married all that long, and as they look at their spouse, taking a job in a new place, think of the pride that they must feel, that they're married to someone who said "Yes, Lord, I will follow You, I'll do what You are calling me to do." Think about Jim Wright, a pastor in Chicago who has come all this way to be with us today, Reverend Carl Frazier, long-time friend of mine, one of our district superintendents in the Eastern part of the state, seeing their son, their daughter. Think of the many things in life they could have done, but they said, "Yes, Lord, I will follow You, I will do what you called me to do."

The church is, indeed, like a family. It's not just the ministers, a family isn't just about somebody in the family, it's about the whole family. The clergy, I think, have a peculiar role within the family. I'm not sure how to define it, but I've been thinking of it lately in terms of someone within the Howell family that I've told you about a few times. I always enjoy the Howell family reunions, people come from various places, we enjoy seeing one another. I think the most valuable Howell is my cousin, Sharon, who's my age. She was born with and all her life has had Down Syndrome, and she is the most valuable Howell because when we come together, she's the one who keeps us humble. She's the one who is the most affectionate and draws out the affection in the rest of us. She's the one who has a grateful heart for the smallest thing conceivable, and she helps all of us to be grateful. So, perhaps it is with the ministers that we hire. They stand up, not to do ministry in our place, but to be the ones who keep us grateful, to be the ones who keep us humble, to be the ones who remind us to love. Many of us in this room are probably grateful to God for some minister. As we install new ministers, I would invite you to think about whoever that minister might be in your life. I can tell you, I am a Christian, and I am a minister because there was a minister who took time for me, who took time to talk to me, to instruct me in the faith, to love me, and even was so bold one day as to look at me across the lunch table and say, "Do you think God has called you into the ministry?" and I turned my head quickly to see to whom he was speaking, and it turned out he was speaking to me.

We have five new clergy. Someone asked me the other day, "Did you hire the five youngest people that you could find?" Actually, I don't really do the hiring in our church, we have a staff parish committee that oversees all personnel matters, the comings and goings, they do it deftly. It is my privilege to work with them. Our clergy are young, and my answer to the person who asked that

is, "Well, we didn't hire the youngest people we could find, we hired the best that we could find." I'm not blowing smoke. We interviewed older people, but we hired the five best people we could find. They are superbly trained, well, one of them did not go to Duke, but we have a procedure in place to get her up to speed on things, and all will be well. They are superbly trained, they are outstanding, and I know some of you, you've noticed this already, you know, I've gone away and haven't been here and when I come back they say, "Go away another week, we want to hear the new preachers who are so outstanding." They are outstanding, indeed, but I know you are tempted to do this thing where you see the bright new people and you say "Oh, she is so smart, she is so gifted, she is so good, and he is so....For someone so young..." I used to get this when I was young. People would look at me and say, "There is a minister with a lot of potential." And now I'm 52 and I have no potential at all. It's like "This is it." So, you see these young people with potential and you think, "Ahh, they're so impressive." Let me name what that is in you to warn you against it. You don't intend it this way, but what it is is an unconscious defense against God's work in your life. These five people are not potential ministers, they are your pastors. These five people aren't standing up here to impress you with their brilliance and how good they are or are going to be, they're your pastors today. You cannot evade God's claim on your life by sitting back as if you're the movie critic and saying, "That was a good one," or as if you've gone to a stage show and said, "Oh, I really like what those actors are doing on the stage." God calls you to get up on the stage and to join hands with the other actors. We are putting on a performance in our lives for God Almighty. The show that we put on is our praise of God, our service of God's children, they can help you, they can guide you.

I was away the last three days giving some talks to the United Methodist Women of our conference up in Greensboro, and I was surprised by the number of them who came up to me and said, "Tell me the story about your call to ministry." You may want to ask this question of these five in the coming weeks: "How'd you get here, how'd that happen?" They will tell you a good story, but I've instructed them that when you ask them this, that they're to ask you a question in return, which is, "How did God call you? What is God calling you to do?" You see, these five ministers, their work is you and your life with God, and their question is, "Will we respond as they have, to say, 'Yes Lord, yes Lord, I believe, Yes Lord, I will follow, Yes Lord, I will feed your sheep. Yes Lord, I will be a part of the building up of the body of Christ on this earth.' "

These five who come are absolutely remarkable people, I love them, and I know that our relationship is the one that I enjoy with Craig Kocher so much, that it will be a lifetime friendship. I can tell you they are marvelous people and not only gifted. What's truly most superb is that they have a purity of soul and of faith. They come to us, not seeking earthly rewards, I mean, if you wanted earthly rewards, you don't go into the ministry, you go work for the bank. Well, that's not as good as it used to be now, is it? They are not seeking earthly reward, what they are seeking is to please God, what they're seeking is for all of us together to please God. I can tell you, my prayer for them is that at the end of their lives, and they are young enough, I will not be here at the end of their lives, but at the end of their lives they will know what Thomas Aquinas knew at the end of his life. Thomas Aquinas, probably the greatest Catholic theologian, a great saint from the Middle Ages, as he lay on his deathbed, everyone was gathered there watching when he would take his last breath. People heard distinctly a voice that they swore was the voice of God from Heaven. God spoke to Thomas Aquinas and said, "Thomas, you have spoken of me well, what reward would you ask for yourself?" Thomas Aquinas did not pause, he said, "Nothing but yourself, oh Lord, nothing but yourself." This is the reward that we all long for, isn't it? Nothing but the Lord, gathered together at a father's bed and board, as the family of God through all of eternity. Thanks be to God.