

# Choosing a Pastor

January 5, 2020

Rev. D. Thomas Ford, Jr.  
Hill Avenue Grace Lutheran Church  
Pasadena, California

Grace to you, and peace, from God Our Father and Our Risen Lord and Savior Jesus The Christ!

I rejoice with you that the time has arrived for you to vote to call a pastor. You have prayed. You have persevered. Your Call Committee has worked diligently, long, hard and smart. All the while, you as a congregation have continued in doing well The Lord's ministries in and through Hill Avenue Grace Lutheran Church. Bishop Irvin and all the supply and interim pastors who have served here in the interim are very proud of you. You can be very proud of yourselves.

I want to share some reflections with you this morning on pastoral ministry itself and on the business of becoming a pastor and choosing a pastor.

Did you ever wonder why each of the 12 disciples wanted to be an apostle? Do you ever wonder what motivates a pastor to want to be a pastor?

I have told some of you this story before. So, I will give a brief summary. This past June 3rd, I celebrated the anniversary of being an ordained Lutheran Pastor for 46 continuous years. Until I was 13 I was convinced I was going to play center field for the New York Yankees. Then one afternoon while playing Babe Ruth League baseball I saw a 15-year-old boy hit a baseball 450 feet, and I realized it was time to reassess my career plans.

About that time, a new pastor at my church, Pastor Dasher, got me interested in the German theologian and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He also got me interested in the theologian and Doctor Albert Schweitzer. I started reading books like *The Cost of Discipleship*. And before the year was over, I began to seriously ask whether God was calling me to the ministry.

I didn't know it at the time, but in their own way, my Grandma Ford and my parents were already in on the conspiracy.

My father was a member of the County's Rescue Squad and was often away on weekends helping find lost children or searching for drowning victims or going from house to house raising money and material help for families burned out of their homes. My Mother and my Grandma Ford were always giving away produce from our farm to neighbors, friends and needy people.

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And I've already told you in detail about how my Grandma Ford once invited a shady-character neighbor just released from prison to have dinner with us on the day of his release. It was a traumatic experience for me at age 12 because the man had cut his wife's throat and had a really bad reputation. Why was I made to sit beside him at dinner?

My Dad and Mom and Grandma were teaching me by example what the Good News of Jesus Christ means. It means reaching out to love others, even if they're branded unlovely or undesirable. It means providing hospitality and material aid to people, including those in dire straits. We do not have to approve of someone's actions to show them compassion. And we must never let fear get in the way of acting compassionately to help someone.

By the time Pastor Dasher left our parish for a new call in 1964, I had resolved that I would become a pastor and ask God to use me to announce the Good News of Jesus Christ in words and in action. God heard my prayer and allowed me to serve as a Pastor, with most of my career as a Pastor being in the specialized area of social ministry, helping to minister to many people like the people I had seen my parents and Grandma minister to as I was growing up. And more than a few who were in far, far worse conditions.

Although I can tell you this is my story, I do not know what led any one of the disciples to want to be an apostle. I'm sure they would have told you. I think it's an important thing to ask, as I'm sure your Call Committee has asked numerous Pastors over the last couple years, including Pastor Johnson.

In 1971, two years before I was ordained, I read a book entitled The Alphabet of Grace by Frederick Buechner, a Presbyterian Pastor, a former Chaplain of Philips Exeter Academy and arguably one of the greatest Christian creative writers of the last 100 years. [The Seabury Press, New York, 1970.]

In the first part of the book, Buechner writes, "In an elegant house on Long Island one summer Sunday, down a long table cluttered with silver and crystal and the faces and hands of strangers, my hostess suddenly directs a question at me. She is deaf and speaks in the ringing accents of the deaf, and at the sound of her question all other conversation stops, and every face turns to hear my answer. 'I understand that you are planning to enter the ministry,' she says. 'Is this your own idea, or have you been poorly advised?'

"I had no answer, and even if I'd had one, it wouldn't have been shoutable, and even if I'd shouted it, she couldn't have heard it, so the question was never answered and thus rings still unanswered in my head. How did I ever get involved in this business to begin with? By what implausible train of circumstances do I find myself standing here now? Why should the words of Jesus move me more than I can say? ---Come unto me." pp. 40-41.

Then, near the end of the book, Buechner picks up this theme again, writing, "I hear you are entering

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the ministry,' the woman said down the long table, meaning no real harm. 'Was it your own idea or were you poorly advised?' And the answer that she could not have heard even if I had given it was that it was not my idea at all, neither my own nor anyone else's. It was a lump in the throat. It was an itching in the feet. It was a stirring in the blood at the sound of rain. It was a sickening of the heart at the sight of misery. It was a clamoring of ghosts. It was a name which, when I wrote it out in a dream, I knew was a name worth dying for even if I was not brave enough to do the dying myself and could not even name the name for sure. Come unto me, all ye who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you a high and driving peace. I will condemn you to death." pp. 109-110. [Meaning, of course, dying with Christ is selfless service.]

It is a very sacred thing for God to choose a person to be a pastor. It is a very sacred thing for a parish to participate with God in the calling of a pastor. God's will for the parish and for the pastor must be paramount. God's will.

How do you decide? The Lord is guiding you. Listen to The Lord. Continue to pray.

In closing, I assure you and Zachary Johnson and his family of my prayers. And I share with you something Pastor Dasher shared with me when I asked him a year before he died (in 2006 at the age of 72) if he could give any guidance to congregations and pastors seeking to know God's will. (He had worked many years as a Bishop's assistant, helping congregations in the call process) Here, verbatim, is what he said:

A pastor must have a love for the people that must show above everything else.

There is only one Savior and the Pastor does not qualify for that role.

Truth is not absolute and there is always room for dialogue.

Pastors must take God's grace seriously so that they do not have to take themselves too seriously.

Ministry happens more through listening than telling.

In a society which stresses function, property, and power, pastors must emphasize the importance of relationship and community.

In a society which promises value as a reward through the right address, right position, right power, or right skin color, pastors live out the fatherhood and motherhood of God and the kinship of all people.

Pastors must affirm that anyone with whom they disagree is nevertheless a child of the heavenly Father.

The church as institution is in a mess. But God has used stables and crosses, simple shepherds and ruthless kings, reluctant prophets and brave theologians, hippies and conservatives, to make known the liberating Good News of justice, love, mercy, and forgiveness. And God will continue to do so.

Let us pray:

O God, we thank you for this day and the happy news and your call to us to be your servants and messengers of love and mercy. And we thank you for the one you have chosen to be the Pastor of this

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congregation. This congregation seeks to know your will as to the one you have chosen. Lead them. Guide them. Love them. Bless them soon with a Pastor. Let your will be done. For the sake of your son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. We continue this prayer, dear Lord, in the words of the hymn, "Savior Like A Shepherd Lead Us."

Amen.

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