

## “Whose Ministry Is It Anyway?”

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8 July 2018 + Gaithersburg Presbyterian Church

Mark 6:1-6 = God’s call to ministry

**M**any years ago I saw reports on Robert Tilton, at the time a prominent prosperity gospel televangelist in Dallas. Before his multi-million dollar empire crumbled over proven fraud, Tilton was in the midst of a very public, very ugly divorce from his second wife, Leigh Valentine, a televangelist in her own right.



In her divorce testimony before the court, Leigh Valentine swore that Robert Tilton had tried, quote, “to shut down my ministry.” That phrase left me wondering: We don’t actually possess a ministry. Ministry is more than mere community property to be defended in a court of law.

We don’t possess the ministry. Rather it possesses us. The ministry of Jesus Christ is active actor rather than passive property. Jesus seeks us. We can never possess it.

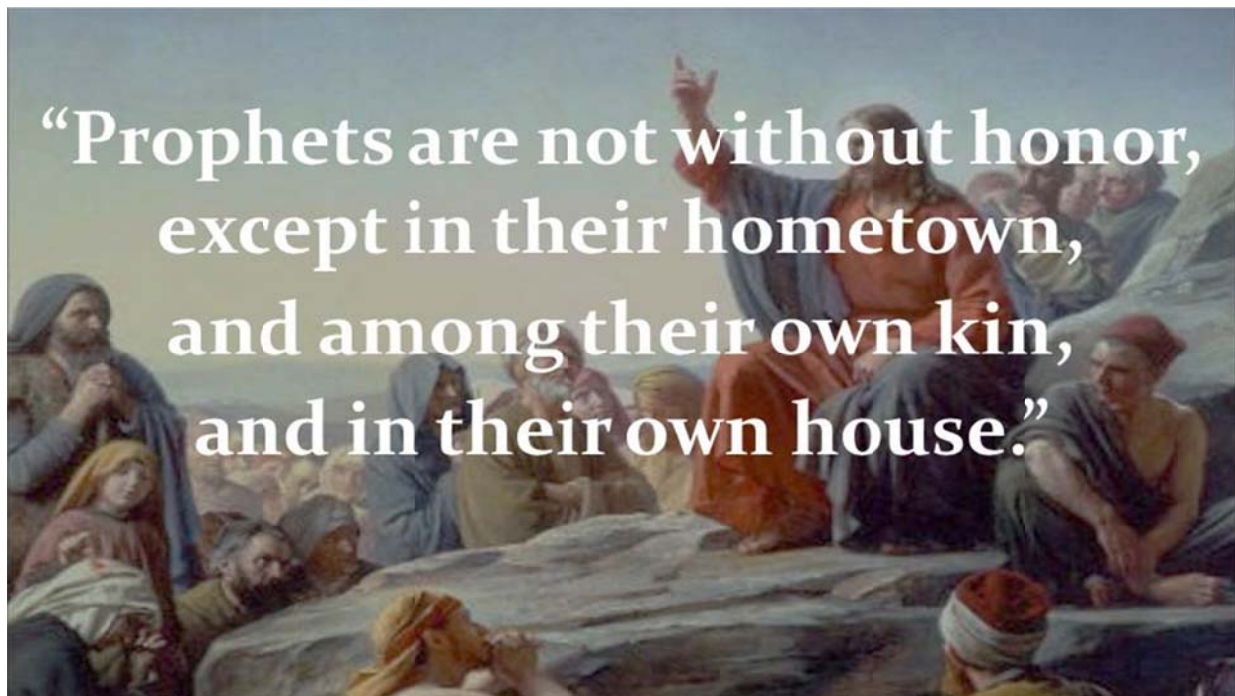
**J**esus is returning to his hometown after a successful preaching tour. The reception is chilly. In fact, the good folks of Nazareth cannot accept Jesus. Scripture states “they took offense at Jesus.”



Jesus had been a boy playing with the other children, raised in their synagogue. Since Jesus had been one of them, they seem to reason that the message and the ministry of Jesus belong to them as well. So they reject God’s message in him and God’s ministry through him.

They can not comprehend that this Jesus they know is now claimed by God, now ministering in God’s name. They fail to recognize whose ministry it truly is.

To those disbelieving townspeople, Jesus utters this memorable line:



With that he moves on ~ knocking the dust of Nazareth off his feet and goes on about his God-claimed business.

Whose ministry is it, anyway?

Jim Street, pastor of a small congregation, enters a supermarket and meets Jan who has recently visited the church with her husband and three children. He greeted her with how much they had appreciated her visit and the hope for her return. Jan replied with that phrase which is the bane of every outreach ministry and every pastor:



"We enjoyed the service, but right now we are just shopping around for the church that meets our needs."

That phrase "church shopping." Every pastor I know shivers when a member says they are switching churches because the congregation "no longer meets my needs." Is it the job of the church to please you, satisfy your desires? Is it God's job to satisfy you, or the other way around? Whose ministry is it?

In Iowa when we were contacting members to serve on the PNC, we concentrated on highly qualified individuals who had precisely the spiritual maturity and discernment gifts that were needed. Yet over and over we received a rejection with the phrase: “I don’t think I’m interested.” How do we come to being “not interested” in God’s call?!

**O**ur market culture renders everything, even faith, a possession to be acquired. This approach puts the consumer in the driver’s seat, and unfortunately it dominates our society. Our culture amplifies wants, needs, desires and plays on them to sell us stuff we neither need nor want. Ministry in our context becomes commoditized, commercialized and reduced to motivational speaking, Prosperity Gospel and “Name It And Claim it” theology. Robert Tilton and Leigh Valentine are extreme but prime examples.



Most of us are unaware of how deeply formed we are within this marketplace of artificially exaggerated desire. Many of us even accept it as normal. We shop for everything else, why not for a faith community? But these falsely created needs are insatiable, and no one can ever find a congregation which can fulfil such unquenchable expectations.

Tyler Stevenson goes on the heart of the problem:<sup>2</sup>

*“Consumerism is itself  
the refusal to recognize, even  
in the most basic of ways,  
the God who created us.”*

*~ Tyler Stevenson*



Faithfulness to the Gospel would call the church to challenge this market culture, helping people instead to identify their real needs and differentiate them from their illegitimate, insatiable desires. Instead, churches too often legitimize the marketplace of desire through a consumer based Christianity ~ one that caters to the whims of churchgoers. Such churches encourage members to expect that the church's sole purpose is to "meet your needs" with a wide variety of programs.<sup>3</sup>

Again we ask "Whose ministry is it, anyway?"

If we would reverse the reduction of the church's ministry to merely trying to fulfill narcissistic cravings, we would look outside our individual selves and beyond the walls of the congregation to discover where God is calling us to be. We would look beyond ministry to ourselves, and look to God's ministry in the world. Would look not to what we want, but focus our energy and attention to what God wants.



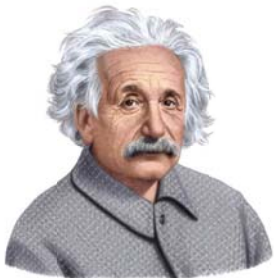
Frederick Buechner in his wisdom points us to where we should be:<sup>4</sup>

*"The place God calls us to  
is the place  
where our deep gladness  
and the world's deep hunger meet."  
~ Frederick Buechner*

It is not our own needs which God wants us to focus on. Our basic, realistic needs are more than met for most of us: not our irrational, insatiable needs, but our actual needs.

Our market culture tells us everything even ministry is all about ourselves, but God's ministry is for us is to live beyond that, to invest our time, talent and treasure in addressing the needs of the community, the needs of the world, the needs for the basic necessities of life among those beyond our protected and comfortable walls ~ the need to work with compassion for justice.

**I**t is widely believed that Albert Einstein had failed math class in his early years. According to a recent biographer however, when he came to the US, a rabbi told Einstein the story had appeared in a newspaper column, Einstein chuckled and assured the rabbi that before he has turned 15 he had already mastered differential and integral calculus. He was in fact a mathematical prodigy with a genius mind.

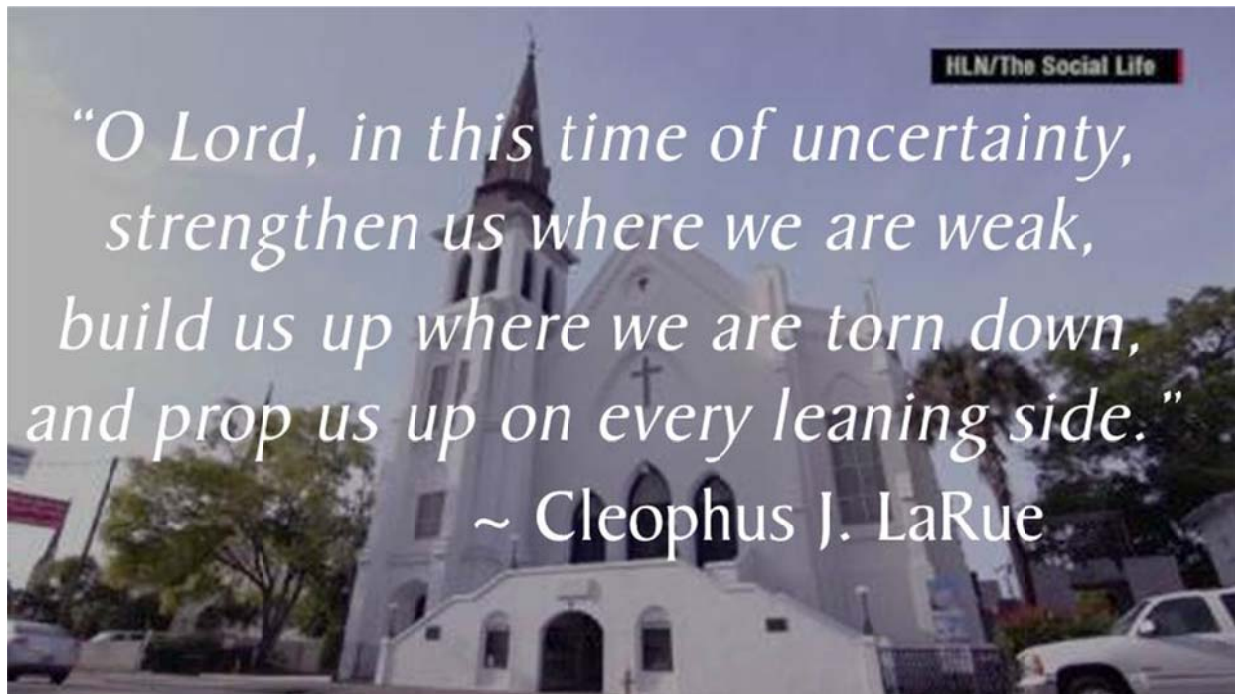


That did not prevent him from rejection by his own academic community. Even after devising a brilliant and revolutionary quantum theory of light he was rejected in seeking employment at the university and had to settle for a low status job in a patent office. Fortunately for us and the world, Einstein was not deterred by this early rejection and failure.<sup>5</sup> And so should we be equally courageous and tenacious in facing even certain defeat. After all, "whose ministry is it?"

**T**here is a wonderful prayer often heard in black churches when the people of God are facing extreme difficulty, rejection and failure in mission just as Jesus experienced in Nazareth. Times like those we face today ~ mass murders in churches, theaters and schools with accelerating frequency, a wave of hate encouraged by our leaders directed at anyone different, particularly today African Americans, Hispanics and immigrants.



It is therefore our prayer as well in times of chaos surrounding us, of political deadlock, of churches under attack, of rising hate, of confusion over who's ministry it really is. We pray with Cleophus LaRue:<sup>6</sup>



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<sup>1</sup> Will Willimon, *Pulpit Resource* for 9 July 2000, p. 8

<sup>2</sup> Tyler Wigg Stevenson, *Brand Jesus: Christianity in a Consumerist Age*, p. 34.

<sup>3</sup> Willimon, *Op.Cit.*, p. 9

<sup>4</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking* p. 95

<sup>5</sup> Cleophus J. LaRue, *Christian Century* June 24, 2015, p. 23

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*