



"The Clarence Principle"

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Deuteronomy 34:1-14

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9:15 AM Service

Then Moses climbed Mount Nebo from the plains of Moab to the top of Pisgah, across from Jericho. There the Lord showed him the whole land—from Gilead to Dan, all of Naphtali, the territory of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Mediterranean Sea, the Negev and the whole region from the Valley of Jericho, the City of Palms, as far as Zoar. Then the Lord said to him, "This is the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob when I said, 'I will give it to your descendants.' I have let you see it with your eyes, but you will not cross over into it."

And Moses the servant of the Lord died there in Moab, as the Lord had said. He was buried in Moab, in the valley opposite Beth Peor, but to this day no one knows where his grave is. Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died, yet his eyes were not weak nor his strength gone. The Israelites grieved for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days, until the time of weeping and mourning was over.

Now Joshua son of Nun was filled with the spirit of wisdom because Moses had laid his hands on him. So the Israelites listened to him and did what the Lord had commanded Moses.

Since then, no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face, who did all those signs and wonders the Lord sent him to do in Egypt—to Pharaoh and to all his officials and to his whole land. For no one has ever shown the mighty power or performed the awesome deeds that Moses did in the sight of all Israel."

Deuteronomy 34:1-12 NIV

What Kind of Church Are We?

First Church is coming up quickly on a transition in just over a month. Old preacher leaves. New preacher arrives. You've been through this many times in 180 years of ministry.

But it is always an opportunity to ask, "What kind of church are we?"

The Staff-Parish Relations Committee, which is our personnel committee on behalf of the congregation, spent a fair amount of time determining how best to describe First Church and its expectations so that the appointment of a new lead pastor could be undertaken with the expectation of developing a strong partnership.

They've done marvelously well, by the way. Pastor Lisa will be, I believe, a strong, loving, and wise pastoral leader with you.

But the question is not just for committee deliberation. It is personal for us all since all of us are here today and, to one extent or another, call this our church home: What kind of church are we?

I want to suggest that the answer to this question uncovers the secret sauce, the heart, that makes First Church vital, vibrant, life-giving, and effective.

The typology of churches can profitably run through categories of social context (urban, suburban, rural), ethnic subsets (language, national origin, race), affiliation (Roman Catholic, United Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Assemblies of God, Non-denominational), and expectations (do I show up to the church expecting it to take care of me or do I show up expecting to be a partner in taking care of the mission of that congregation?).

Over the past three or four decades in North America, the issue often has been the size of the congregation. This is pretty much a fit with what has been our cultural drift in commerce as well as church life or, rather, church adopted a cultural value: bigger is better. The grading of churches on the basis of attendance or membership is related to an underlying dynamic of what generally is referred to as "organizing principles". The simple way I refer to this is, "Why do people show up?" And there seem to be too ends of a spectrum when it comes to why they show up which, I believe, reveals the nature and character of First Church.

Let me give an example that may be familiar to some of us. I first came across this analogy from Kevin Miller, an Anglican Pastor in Wheaton. I'm adapting it to my experiences and think you may be able to relate to this.

The Clarence Principle

I'll call it The Clarence Principle.

I grew up in a household of five boys, two parents, and a St. Bernard named Sam. If you are a parent and have more than two children, you already understand that there are parenting challenges when you move from man-to-man strategy to a zone defense. Two parents dealing with five boys called for a zone strategy. This was, of course, most important on Saturdays when there was no school to help provide order to the day.

What I now understand compounded the challenge for my parents was just this: my dad was a physician. We lived with the local community hospital two blocks in one direction from the house and his office at the clinic one block in the other direction from the house. And he typically worked on Saturdays. Which meant, before leaving earlier than we rallied from the sack, Dad prepared and left a list of chores for his sons. These would range from cleaning out the basement to yard work to painting to changing or repairing or whatever. The problem, of course, was that a list without much management put in the hands of boys might not yield the anticipated results. We had no grandpas to guide us and just one grandma who lived on the other side of the block. We could definitely go to her for advice on yard work and things like pruning, weeding, and the like, but if we DID go to her, we generally got assigned to a task at HER house -- which defeated the purpose of the "list of chores".

So, the note on the list and the recommendation from mom was, for those tasks with which we were not already familiar, "go to Jebens and see Clarence."

Jebens was a hardware store on Western Avenue. We lived just a block west of Western, so it was an easy walk which, to my estimate, was always a good idea since you had to go by Little Jack's Bakery and there is nothing that works up an appetite for an éclair or crème horn like thinking about yard work or home repair.

Anyway, when you went into Jebens you were in a different world. It wasn't all that big, but it was crowded. There were three narrow aisles. The counters were filled with merchandise, shelves were overflowing, and stuff was hanging from the ceiling. One wall was filled with little bins and shelves that had various nuts and bolts and nails and screws. And there was a section of chemicals to do battle with weeds and gophers, ants and slugs. A little repair shop sort of area for screens, windows, and -- interestingly -- clocks and radios. Tools, parts and pieces, and wire and cable, and locks and keys, and mops, brooms, and ladders. No way would you find anything in there.

Not to worry, though. Because you were not really on your own. Upon entering the store, once the bell on the door frame had announced your presence, Clarence would look up from the counter or repair bench or off the ladder where he'd been doing something in one of those bins on the wall, and say, "Good morning. Anything I can help you with today?"

And when you said, "I'm supposed to change out a light bulb socket and put in a fluorescent light in the furnace room," Clarence would guide you through the job: What kind of socket are you taking out? Do you know where your circuit box is and how to cut the power? You'll need some wire nuts...and what kind of ceiling do you have? You might need toggles or maybe just some wire clips on the conduit nearby to hang it." And before too long you had the stuff, some instructions, and a coach to help navigate the project.

I've got to admit that at least half of the time there was a second trip to see Clarence because either I didn't describe the situation quite accurately or had misjudged the size of whatever needed something to attach it to something else. It wasn't really a very efficient way of doing things, but I learned a lot about a lot.

Today, when I have a project on Saturday, I might head to Home Depot. Unlike Jebens Hardware, Home Depot is huge. The ceilings are 30 feet high. Home Depot has forty or sixty or eighty times the inventory of Jebens. It all looks great under bright, argon lights.

There is a guy in an orange apron—a block away. If you run him down, catch his attention and ask a question, he's likely to say, "Sorry. I usually work in paints. I'm just covering in electrical because someone called in sick." Follow the big hanging signs, stare at the stuff on the shelves, and take a guess about what might work. You're pretty much on your own.

There's a similar dynamic which we can observe in churches.
Worship became entertainment

Sermons became pep talks based on celebrity interviews, a light douring of psychological insight and motivational inspiration, and some fill in the blank three easy steps to the life you've always dreamed of.

We made Jesus a commodity, faith into a DIY project, Bible study became not so much Bible nor very much study but reading best-selling authors latest book that led us on to their next latest book. In short, we made ourselves into religious consumers and re-framed faith in Jesus as a plug and play lifestyle accessory.

But life is much more complex than that and following Jesus is much richer, fuller, more demanding, and joyful than that. We all need a Clarence, someone who knows more than we do and who will guide us to grow in Christ.

Throughout the Bible this is the primary way faith has been passed on and faithful people are developed. Moses trains Joshua in how to lead; Eli trains Samuel in how to pray; Jesus teaches the apostles; Timothy's grandmother Lois trains up her daughter Eunice, who trains up her son Timothy; Paul calls Titus his "son" in the faith. When it comes to helping people grow into spiritual maturity, the Bible gives us "the Clarence Principle": the older teach the younger, the more experienced coach the less experienced, and those who've been on the path awhile guide those who are just getting started.

It is the difference between being a religious consumer -- the church exists to serve me -- and being part of a committed community of Christ followers. The committed community offers a *reciprocal relationship* where I can explore and grow in and express my faith in Jesus as well as help others explore, grow in, and express their faith, too.

First Church, by the grace of God, has avoided the twin tragedies of becoming so insular that you have to be born into it to belong or so market-chasing that we attract people to events but fail to build life-long and life-giving relationships. We are large enough to have the capacity to make a difference in the lives of individuals and families, the community, and the world, but small enough to be within arms' length of one another. We develop Christians in small batches.

Keeping the Pace

First Church is blessed with so many Clarence-type people! This is a rare congregation with people who care about one another, about the community in which we live, and about the world we are sent to heal and serve.

It is a community with opportunities and expectations. When we become members of First Church, we commit ourselves to be a partner in the mission of the congregation through our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness. This means all of us have a stake in and have promised to be part of the future of First Church.

You have probably heard the story about four people with an important mission. The four people are named Everybody, Somebody, Anybody and Nobody.

There was an important job to be done and Everybody was sure that Somebody would do it. Anybody could have done it, but, as it turned out, Nobody did it. Somebody got angry about that, because it was Everybody's job. Everybody thought Anybody could do it, but Nobody realized that Everybody wouldn't do it. It ended up that Everybody blamed Somebody when Nobody did what Anybody could have done.

The story may be confusing but the message is clear: major tasks require personal commitments from all.

First Church, as I said earlier, is on the edge of a pastoral transition. Some among us may have in mind that we throttle back and watch for a while to see if we want to be involved with our new Lead Pastor, Lisa Kruse-Safford. In preparing for this transition, the Staff-Parish relations Committee was very clear that First Church did not need a pastor who would tell the congregation what to do, but a pastor who could join First Church in a partnership for a mission already underway. When Pastor Lisa arrives, she should not need to ask, "Is anybody home?". She should be greeted with the strong message: "We're all in! Welcome to the mission of First Church!"

One of the practical ways we all take responsibility for the future of First Church is through our financial support. We don't beg, coerce, manipulate, or deceive about finances. Our practice is the simple, ancient, and faithful practice of giving proportionately from what we have. We are partners not only in worship and prayer, but also in providing the financial means through which First Church continues to serve. Giving the first and the finest of what we have is a personal statement of our trust in God's provision and a personal statement of our practical partnership in the mission of Jesus right here and right now.

The Estimate of Giving Card is a tool we use to indicate our expectations for the year ahead and guides our Finance Team in planning for the ministry of the church through the next twelve months.

I invite you to complete one of these cards for yourself/your household and offer it this morning as you come to the Lord's Table.