

Authority from God  
Acts 19, 1-7  
Delivered January 11, 2009

We were supposed to ordain and install Jody Harris several weeks ago, but Jody got sick with a horrible flu thing, so we called it off. Last week was no good for the ordination and installation either, since it was a communion Sunday. I didn't want us to still be sitting here when the uplighting kicked in at dusk. So, today is the day! Call it luck or call it fate, but our lectionary scripture passage is a perfect fit for what we are about today. It makes me think that not only are we in sync with the lectionary cycle, but maybe, I hate to say this since it sounds so New Ageish, but maybe we are even in sync with the cosmos. If that is the case, then all of this bodes well for Jody's tenure on our Session.

As I said, today we are laying hands on Jody. The laying on of hands, if we didn't know it before, we know now, is rooted in scripture. We just read about a laying on of hands in Acts. Actually, the laying on of hands is one of the earliest practices recorded in the Bible. Way back in Genesis, Isaac laid hands on Jacob, remember? Isaac bestowed on Jacob a blessing that was meant for his twin brother Esau. That blessing gave Jacob authority to serve as patriarch of the family. In Deuteronomy we read that Moses laid hands on Joshua, before he died, conveying to him Moses' God given authority to lead the Israelites into the Promised Land. In Numbers, we read that Aaron laid hands on the Levites, and they received authority to be priests. That's all in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, several times the Apostles lay hands on believers, for the same purpose—the transference of authority. Remember when the widows weren't receiving their daily distribution of food? Peter and the other Apostles laid hands on (quote) “Seven fine men of good standing who were full of the Spirit and of wisdom.” With that show of authority, they were ready to serve at tables. Finally, we read in our passage for today that after Paul had baptized some disciples (about twelve, the text tells us), he laid hands on them. The laying on of hands was a sign of their authority to serve—serve in what capacity we don't know—but my guess would be to serve as leaders in the fledgling church in Ephesus.

When the elders and ministers present today lay hands on Jody, which is what we will be doing. We will be transferring our authority as leaders in the Presbyterian Church. We will be transferring that authority to Jody. And that is what I would like to spend some time talking about before we actually do this thing. I want to talk about Authority.

You know, one of the biggest differences between my previous church and this church is how they regard authority. I have already told you, I think, that in my previous church 99.8 percent of the members are attorneys. The other two tenths of a percent are politicians or people who work in the government. The reason that church has so many lawyers and government types is because my previous church is located in the DC suburbs—a short commute to the District. Power and authority are important to these

folks. Will to power is floating in the air along with all the air pollutants. As you might imagine, that will-to-power is played out in the life of the church. At church staff meetings we'd sometimes shake our heads and whine: "So many chiefs, so few Indians." Everyone wanted to serve on our Session—because of course then you had an opportunity to have a say in how the church was run and everyone thought that they knew best. Think about that. At that church, the Nominating Committee had the unpleasant task of selecting four Session members every year from a whole slew of eager souls. Nominating committee members knew that for every one person nominated, there would be a handful of disappointed church members wishing they had been the one instead.

And then I came here. The first time we had to fill a Session slot, folks on Cove's Session sucked in their breath, like I was talking about initiating a 3 billion dollar building campaign. I mean really! And they said, "Good luck with that." Then we got the Nominating Committee together and folks on that committee went through all the names on our membership roster. They said things like: "Well, you know, so and so and so and so have already done their time." Like being on Session was a prison sentence; or they would say, "Well, there is so and so. She would be good on Session, but she is already over stressed." Like being on Session could possibly push her over the edge and land her in a psychiatric ward, or worse—the grave. "Well, you know, Mary was a member of this church, but she became a Session member and after that, she never was the same. Poor soul." Hearing all the concern about filling one single spot on the Session, I thought to myself, "What is going on?"

I've spent quite a bit of time contemplating this phenomenon. I really have. Part of it is easy to figure out. Our reluctance to pony up has to do with our numbers. My previous church has 700 members. Cove Church, which is growing by the way, has just over 60 members. Everyone at Cove is already wearing a lot of hats. You come to church early on Sunday to rehearse with the choir, or set up for church school, then after church you help clean up after communion, or from our Fellowship hour. Maybe during the week, you are cooking for our Fellowship dinner, or thinking about what flowers you are going to use for the flower arrangements on Sunday. Maybe you attend a church meeting, too. And then, because we don't have a grounds crew, or a custodian, once a quarter you are over at the church, picking up sticks or raking leaves, or moving furniture, or putting up or taking down a Christmas tree--the list goes on. And you think to yourself, "You're asking me to take on one MORE job at Cove Church? Think again, my friend."

Another reason is related to the first reason. When I came here, I thought, "Little country church. The slow pace of country living. Sweet." That was wrong. You are living fast paced lives, only some of you have a further commute than city dwellers which may make your lives even more fast paced than the fast paced life of a city dweller. Did you follow that? Also, at my previous church, there are a lot of RETIRED attorneys and government types. These folks are available. They help tremendously with the day to day operations of the church. Apparently, here at Cove everyone works 'til they drop. No one really retires. Like energizer bunnies, we just keep moving around in circles playing our tiny drums. You don't want authority, you want time.

Finally, and this is a new insight for me-- at my previous church, members put great stock in organizations—after all, that is where they work—in law firms, or government agencies. They are comfortable working in committees, dealing with budgets, looking at flow charts—and they are comfortable with the notion of authority. In other words, they are part of the status quo. Indeed, they help create the status quo. At Cove, many of us are painters, writers and musicians. We don't know how to read flow charts. And you know what artists do? At their best, artists critique the status quo. And artists of course, are free spirits. I was TV surfing this week and I came across an old rerun of the TV show Friends. I think that as a group we have a lot in common with Phoebe. My other church taken as a whole, has a lot in common with Ross. At my previous church, folks would no doubt agree with the likes of Plato who said, "The wisest have the most authority." And doesn't everyone want to be wise? At Cove, we are more apt to agree with Timothy Leary who said, "Think for yourself and question authority."

So there we have it. And yet, if we are really honest with ourselves, we know that some type of organization is necessary. Some folks are required to lead. Would the Christian movement have survived after Jesus' crucifixion if the Apostles had not been there to pick up the pieces and organize themselves into churches? Think about that. Would the church have lasted 2000 years if the Apostles, including Paul, had not had the good sense to delegate authority to others?

Now, up until this moment I have talked about authority and organization almost as if they are necessary evils. Sometimes it certainly seems to be the case. But authority, the kind of authority we are talking about here today, comes from God, and God is good. Authority is given for the good purpose of furthering the mission of the church. What is that mission? For the church as a whole that mission is to go and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost. Cove Church is dedicated to that mission certainly, but it also has its own compelling well-thought-out mission statement, created in a committee, by the way. It is this: **Cove's mission is to grow in faith and wisdom, to learn to love better, and to promote social justice to the world. By inviting all into worship, singing, fellowship, study and service, we glorify God.**

It's a simple mission statement. But we can't achieve that mission if each person works individually, as a solo agent. It takes the election of good and honest and thoughtful leaders who are dedicated to the work of the church. It takes planning and talking and thinking and going to meetings and more meetings and making sure that everybody is working off the same page.

Finally, I want to say that I hope Jody, you yourself will actually grow in faith and wisdom and that you will learn to love better as you serve the church these next three years. The Session is a fantastic group of people with vision and a willingness to persevere. It has been my personal experience, and I hope that other Session members will agree with this, that the more I give to the church, the more I receive. And actually,

the latter far outweighs the former. May it be so for you as well. Let all the people say,  
Amen