

PRINCIPLES & PRACTICES »

- Thriving Communities
- Vibrant Institutions
- Christ-Shaped Leadership
- Traditioned Innovation
- Transformative Leadership
- Generative Organization
- Sustainable Design

ARCHIVES »

- Recently Published
- Browse by Topic
- Browse by Feature Type

STAFF & SERVICES »

- About Leadership Education
- Staff Directory
- Program Offerings
- Custom Services

BROWSE FEATURES

- Articles »
- Multimedia »
- Profiles »
- Q&A »
- Reflections »
- Sermons »

Call &
Response
blog 
READ. DISCUSS. IMAGINE. »

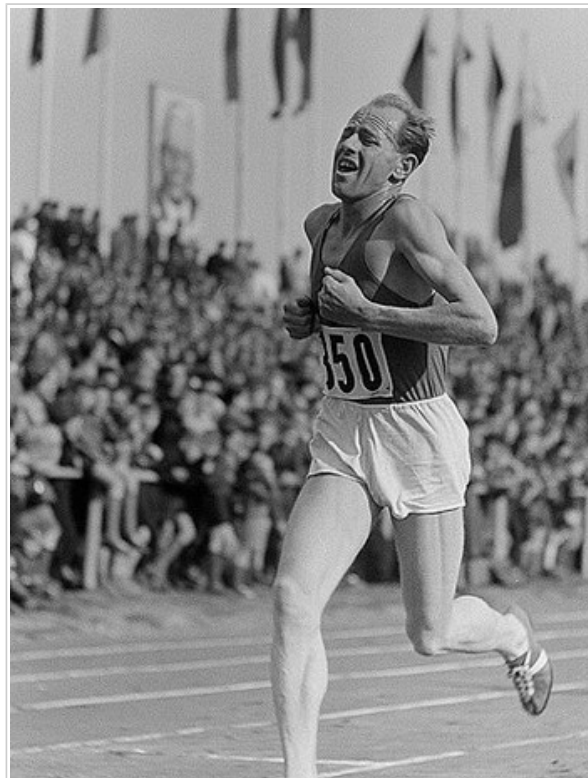
-  EMAIL
-  PRINT
-  SHARE

Sermon: *Vocation*

Samuel Wells: Seeing the glory

During the Last Supper, Jesus tells his disciples to believe in him, do what he does, and he adds an astonishing third element -- do greater things than him. The former dean of Duke University Chapel wonders what this could possibly mean.

by [Samuel Wells](#)



Creative Commons / Wikimedia

Czech runner Emil Zatopek, who won gold medals in the marathon and 5,000- and 10,000-meter races at the 1952 Olympics. "Just as Emil Zatopek went beyond just sticking to his original plan, Stephen went beyond just being in ministry," Samuel Wells writes.

August 30, 2011

[Acts 7:55-60](#), [John 14:1-14](#)

More On This Topic

Article

[The Wabash way »](#)

Q&A

[James Bowers and Kimberly Alexander: Leadership and women in Pentecostal ministry »](#)

Article

[ESTEEM prepares Catholic college students for church leadership now »](#)

Q&A

[Martha Simmons: I love the work of the church »](#)

Sermon

[Christi O. Brown: Making mud pies »](#)

SUBSCRIBE

Enjoy our content?
Follow our content on
your choice of a variety of
formats, including [e-newsletters](#),
[RSS](#), [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), [YouTube](#)
and [iTunes](#).



GO

Editor's note: Faith & Leadership offers sermons that shed light on issues of Christian leadership. The Rev. Samuel Wells preached this sermon on June 17, 2011, at the UMC Virginia Annual Conference.

This is a great occasion. A service of ordination, licensing and commissioning is the crossing of an important threshold. It's the end of a demanding period of training and the beginning of a wonderful time of adventure in ministry. A lot of you have brought friends and family members from far and wide. There's a whole communion of saints up there, and throw in a few more angels and you could be forgiven for thinking you were being welcomed into heaven.

So let me spoil it for you.

Let me read the words of Jesus according to St. Matthew:

See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves. Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles. You will be hated by all because of my name.

You still up for this? OK, I'm going to close my eyes for 15 seconds and if you want to slip out, now's the time to do it and we'll say no more about it. Still here? Seriously? Did you hear what he said: "Everyone will hate you because of me"?

Now there's an easy solution to this. Keep the ministry part. Keep the community leader, the chair of the meeting, the brilliant youth ministry, the bedside manner, the busy calendar, the high professional standards, the business cards, the discretionary budget, the classy robes, the reserved parking space, the touching anecdotes, the ready sense of humor.

No one hates you for those things. They admire you. Just leave out Jesus. That's what they hate. Got it? In Matthew 10 we're told quite bluntly that the reason people will hate us is on account of Jesus. So it's simple: Leave out Jesus and you'll be just fine. They'll love it. Really.

That's the temptation you'll face every single day for the rest of your life. Keep the ministry. Just leave out Jesus. Then they'll love you. See how long it takes until anyone notices. You going to resist that temptation every day? They're going to hate you, remember. You still up for this?

If you are still up for this, if you want, like Jesus, not just to love your people but to love them to the very end, then let's take a close look at what you're in for.

Something in each one of you has decided that, if you're going to do this Christianity thing, you're going to do it properly. You're not going to be checking the minimum requirements box; you're going to look for total immersion. You don't just want to see some results; you want to see the glory.

OK, let's see the glory together. Have you seen the glory of God? Do you want to? That's what we're talking about. Hold tight. Let's go looking for the glory.

Three stages of faith

At the Last Supper in John's gospel, Jesus tells his disciples what it means to be a Christian. He said, "The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these." Just stay with those words a moment. They suggest three stages of faith.

There is believing in Jesus, there is doing what Jesus does, and then there is this astonishing third element -- doing greater things than Jesus. What could that possibly mean?

In Matthew 10, Jesus said:

When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.

What will you say?

When we turn to Acts 6 and 7, it's as if we find that Luke is giving us an immediate answer to these questions. Acts is the story of how the wonder that God did in Jesus was translated through the power of the Holy Spirit into the gift of the church. By chapter 6, we've already had quite a few bends in the road. Acts 6 and 7 is about Stephen, one of the first ministers set apart by the early church.

I want to read Stephen's story with you to find out what it means to be called to ministry and what it means to be licensed, commissioned and ordained.

The story begins where the life of any local church dwells -- with a mixture of logistical problems and lingering resentments. You got some tensions and jealousies between those who like the contemporary service and those who prefer the traditional service? Stephen has got a similar problem. There are too many mouths to feed, and the Greek-speaking believers are cross because it seems their people were getting smaller portions than the Hebrew-speakers. The answer is a division of labor. The disciples are relieved of the soup-kitchen duties, and seven deacons are appointed to run the food-distribution side of the operation. Stephen is one of the seven.

Stephen has the same temptation you have. He has the temptation to keep the ministry and lose Jesus. They'd love it. But Stephen avoids that temptation. Why? Because Stephen wanted to see the glory.

Five windows to ministry

I want to talk about five windows Stephen gives us onto what it means to be in ministry -- five windows for him, and five windows for those who embark on ministry.

Here's the first window. Stephen feeds the hungry. Nothing fancy, nothing complicated, no long words like systemic injustice or cycles of poverty. Stephen just feeds the hungry. To be in ministry involves feeding the hungry. You fed the hungry lately? Is it time you did?

The story of Stephen begins with the conviction that being in ministry means turning faith into concrete acts of love. That's great. But that's not the whole story. It's good to feed the hungry. But remember Jesus' words, "You will do greater things than these." Here is Stephen's question for you: Do you want to see the glory?

Here's the second window Stephen gives us about what it means to be a Christian. It turns out beautiful and surprising things started happening around him -- things that made people think, things that made people wonder, things that turned people toward God.

To be in ministry should mean people look at your life and see traces of grace, they should be able to say there's something about you, they should be able to see that you have a peace, a presence, a power, a purpose that makes people think, makes people wonder, turns people toward God. Do people say that about you? Is it time you started letting God do beautiful things through you and in you?

The story of Stephen shows that being in ministry means people will notice a difference in and around you. That's great. But that's not the whole story. It's good to draw people toward God. But remember Jesus' words, "You will do greater things than these." Here's Stephen's question for you: Do you want to see the glory?

Here's the third window Stephen gives us onto what it means to be in ministry. He faces opposition. A lot of influential people don't like what he's doing and what he's saying and what's happening around him. Anyone can be in ministry when they're going with the flow and swimming with the stream. But what's it like when people hate you, undermine you, despise you, make up stories about you, plot your demise, rejoice in your downfall? That's what they did to Stephen. And what was his response?

The story says, "All who sat in the council looked intently at him, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel." How do you react when people tell lies about you?

The story of Stephen shows that being in ministry starts to really count when everyone turns against you. That's great. But that's not the whole story. It's good to respond to hostility with grace. But remember Jesus' words, "You will do greater things than these." Here's Stephen's question for you: Do you want to see the glory?

Here's the fourth window Stephen gives us onto what it means to be in ministry. He tells the story of God, of Israel and of Jesus. He shows how Jesus is the heart of God and how God has tried every

possible way to be close to us and how God will never give up on us.

As Jesus tells us, “What you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.” You think Stephen knew what he was going to say when he stood up before the council? You think they were *his* words? To be in ministry means being a living witness, it means letting the Spirit of your Father speak through you. Is that what your life is like? Is it a story that makes no sense without Jesus?

The story of Stephen shows that being in ministry also means letting the Spirit sing through you. That’s great. But that’s not the whole story. It’s good to tell people God’s story. But remember Jesus’ words, “You will do greater things than these.” Here’s Stephen’s question for you: Do you want to see the glory?

You’ve heard a call to ministry because you want to go that little bit further. You want to go beyond just being a Christian and fulfilling the bare necessities of discipleship, until you go into new territory with God as your guide. You want to feel again the wonder of being a child of God, a child of adventure and discovery and grace. You’ve heard Stephen’s question, and your answer is, “Yes. Yes, I do want to see the glory. Show me, take me, lead me. Let me see the glory.”

Beyond just being in ministry

Now let me tell you a story.

Those of you who follow track and field will know that something very remarkable happened in the men’s marathon at the Helsinki Olympics of 1952. The marathon traditionally takes place on the last day of the games, after all the other events have been completed. In the 1952 games the sensation of the men’s track and field program had been a Czech runner named Emil Zatopek.

He’d already won the 5,000- and 10,000-meter gold medals earlier in the week. Far from being exhausted from his achievements, he thought he’d go a step further and try his hand at the marathon. He wasn’t satisfied with doing exactly what he’d planned to do. He wanted to see the glory.

He’d never run a marathon before, but he thought, “I have a chance that very few people ever get.”

About half way through the marathon, a bunch of runners broke away from the field. One of them was Zatopek. Before long there were only two runners left fighting for the lead. One was the English world record-holder Jim Peters. The other was Zatopek.

After about 15 miles, Zatopek turned to Peters and said, “Is this about the right pace, or should we be going faster?”

Peters replied, half joking, “Ideally, we should be going faster.”

So Zatopek went faster, and ended up winning the race by about half a mile and breaking the Olympic record by a full six minutes.

Zatopek could have stuck to the original plan to succeed at the 5,000- and 10,000-meters. But he wanted to go further, much further.

He could have run a conservative marathon, it being his first. But he’d caught a glimpse of something very special. No one had ever won all three races at an Olympics. No one has ever done it since.

You can almost hear him thinking 16 miles into the race, “You will do greater things than these.” He wanted to see the glory. And he discovered resources and strength and resilience he never knew he had.

As Emil Zatopek went beyond just sticking to his original plan, Stephen went beyond just being in ministry.

Yes, Stephen fed the hungry. That was basic. Yes, he let God do beautiful things in him. That became second nature. Yes, he met hatred and hostility with the face of an angel. That was because he saw God even in his enemies. Yes, he told the story of God. He knew no other story to tell. How could he keep from singing? But Stephen didn’t just want to be in ministry. He wanted to see the glory.

And Stephen did see the glory. The members of the council were enraged at Stephen's speech and got ready to stone him. But Stephen "gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God." Stephen saw the glory. To see the glory he had to be prepared to go beyond the basics of ministry. He had to go beyond parking spots and tidy offices and pension plans and annual conferences and books of discipline and staff-parish committees and all the paraphernalia of church order. He had to go out of his depth. He had to be ready to die as Jesus died.

Three ways to see the glory

Let me tell you about a man who saw the glory. His name was Leonard Wilson. He was living in Singapore in 1942 when the Japanese invaded the country during the Second World War. Eighty-thousand troops surrendered, the city was in chaos, everyone was panicked and many people were in danger.

Leonard was interned. He was kept in terrible conditions, and for many months he suffered regular beatings and torture. He constantly prayed to God for patience, for courage and for love. God gave him plenty of opportunities to exercise such virtues. In the middle of the torture, his Japanese guards asked him if he still believed in God. He said, "I do." So they asked, "Why doesn't your God save you?" Leonard said, "God does save me. He doesn't save me by freeing me from pain or punishment, but he saves me by giving me the strength to bear it."

Day after day, Leonard had to cower in the face of his persecutors. Many times he prayed, "Father, I know these men are doing their duty. Help them to see that I am innocent."

Yet he looked at their faces as they stood round, taking in turns to flog him, and their faces were hard and cruel, and some of them were evidently enjoying themselves. But Leonard saw them as they had been -- as little children with their brothers and sisters and happy in their parents' love. He saw them not as they were, but as they were capable of becoming -- and that stopped him from hating them.

He faced real hunger. It was overwhelming. One of the other prisoners was allowed food from the outside. The man could have eaten all of it, but instead, never a day passed without his sharing it with some people of the cell. Others were inspired to follow suit, and they began to share with one another.

After eight months Bishop Wilson was released and for the first time got into the sunlight. He had never known such joy. It seemed like a foretaste of the Resurrection. For months afterward he felt at peace with the universe, though he was still interned.

He had seen the glory of God and what he had discovered was this: "God is to be found in the Resurrection, as well as in the Cross, and it is the Resurrection that has the final word."

Let's come back to Stephen for a moment. Look at the way Stephen dies. Stephen is surrounded by the Jerusalem Council; Jesus was surrounded by the Jerusalem Council. Stephen is filled with the Holy Spirit; Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit. Stephen is dragged out of the city; Jesus was led out of the city. As Stephen dies, he prays, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit"; as Jesus died he prayed, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Stephen prays, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them"; Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." Stephen died like Jesus. That's when he saw the glory.

Stephen's life teaches us that to be in ministry means you spend a lot of time with the hungry. It means you let God do beautiful things in you. It means you let the Holy Spirit speak through you.

But then one of three things can happen. Maybe like Leonard Wilson you face the brutal face of the world's hatred through no fault of your own. Maybe like Stephen you live a life that infuriates people so much that they harass and attack you. Or maybe, like Emil Zatopek, you realize that God's given you something special, and you feel a call to seek out that little bit more.

Three ways to see the glory. None of them is easy. All of them are about living so close to the boundary between life and death that you can see the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. That's what it means to be in ministry.

Now here's a question for you: Do you still want to do greater things than these? Do you still want to see the glory?

