

"Equipped for Ministry"

Rev. Dr. Peter Bynum

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I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ²with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

⁷But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. ⁸Therefore it is said, "When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people."... ¹¹The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, ¹²to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. ¹⁴We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. ¹⁵But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love. (Ephesians 4:1-8, 11-16)

Again and again in the Bible, God calls people into jobs that they are convinced are above or beyond them. Moses feared that he was not a good enough speaker to be a leader. Isaiah was concerned about his foul mouth. Gideon not only worried that his family name was not respected enough, but that he was the least respected in that family. Jeremiah meekly responded to God, "I am only a boy."

Thousands of years later, we are still having these reactions to God's calls. Maybe someone doesn't feel qualified to teach Sunday school because they fear their biblical knowledge is not thorough enough, or a respected person worries about being an elder or deacon because he or she is self-conscious about praying in public. Even if we are attracted to a particular project or type of work, doubts can creep in... doubts that make us wonder if we are really up to the task.

That is why this pastoral word that encouraged the church of Ephesus so many years ago still speaks powerfully to us today. Everyone has gifts, the passage says. Everyone possesses unique abilities to serve God and God's people, because God is always at work **equipping** us for ministry. The Greek verb actually means more than just "giving us what we need" for ministry. It suggests a process of bringing us into "a condition of fitness," as if God is finely tuning us, making continual adjustments that will enable us to work more effectively. We are, in short, being perfected to fill the specific roles God has given to us.¹

Looking back, George Lombardi sees how this process has always been at work in his own life.² He had no idea what would come when he got that random phone call on a Saturday afternoon back in 1989. He was at home alone, unpacking some boxes. At 32, his

¹ <https://biblehub.com/greek/2677.htm>

² This illustration is a retelling of the story "Mission to India" told by George Lombardi, <https://themoth.org/storytellers/george-lombardi>, accessed August 1, 2018.



young medical practice had just begun. He certainly didn't expect the call at home to be about work, but when he picked up the line, a woman he did not know started asking him very direct questions. "Are you Dr. George Lombardi? Are you an infectious disease specialist? Are you considered to be an expert in tropical infections? Would you consider yourself an expert in viral hemorrhagic fevers?"

Finally he asked the one question he could think of in response. "***Who is this?***"

The woman introduced herself, with the additional explanation that she was representing "a world figure and Nobel laureate, someone who is suspected to have a viral hemorrhagic fever." His name had been recommended to them as someone who could consult on the case.

He thought it must be a joke. He barely had any patients. The phone almost never rang. But before he knew it, he was on a conference call with a clinic in India. Two experienced doctors were on the line and they eventually disclosed the name of the patient. Mother Theresa had fallen ill, and they could not figure out what was wrong. They were clearly very concerned. Dr. Lombardi did his best to offer a few ideas, some thoughts that he suspected they had already considered. He wished them all well. About an hour later the phone rang again. The doctors had been impressed, and they wanted him to fly to Calcutta immediately. "We can get you out tomorrow on the Concord," they said.

In the back of his mind, the doctor remembered that the last time he had used his passport it was almost out of date. Sure enough, when he found it, it had expired. When he called the State Department to see if he could expedite the processing, the official had said no. Mother Theresa's health, they said, was not a matter of US national security, nor was the nun related to Lombardi.³ He called his contact back to say that the trip would be impossible without a valid passport.

The woman on the other end of the phone, however, was not concerned. "That's a minor detail," she said. "Meet me tomorrow morning at 7 a.m."

The next morning, a Sunday morning, the woman pulled up right on time to the curb outside Lombardi's apartment. She was driving a beat up station wagon with simulated wood grain paneling, bad shocks, and a tailpipe blowing more than its fair share of smoke. Their first stop was the passport office at Rockefeller Center. Lombardi couldn't believe it when the door opened to their knock, and a bleary-eyed State Department official let them in, took Lombardi's picture, and gave him a brand new passport, all in about 15 minutes.

The next stop was the Indian Consulate. As the station wagon pulled in, the entire staff was present, in their full dress uniforms, to give him an honor guard procession. They led him directly to the office of the Consul General, who affixed the visa to the doctor's new passport personally. "We bestow our blessings on you," he said to Lombardi. "The eyes of the world are upon you."

It was at this moment that Lombardi thought, "Maybe this is kind of a big deal."

They whisked him home to pick up his packed bags. They picked him up in the same smoky station wagon, only this time there were five nuns lined up in the back seat, sitting, he said, like five birds on a perch. They all gave him small packages, asking that he pass the gifts on to certain sisters that he was likely to meet in India. But he was surprised when

³ <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1989/09/19/Mother-Teresas-doctor-sees-effects-of-her-compassion/2708622180800/>

they stayed in the car all the way out to JFK. Finally he asked his driver, “Why are the nuns still here? I’ve got the gifts, they didn’t need to ride all the way with us.”

“I didn’t exactly know how to tell you this,” the driver said. “You don’t have a confirmed seat on the Concord. You are flying standby.” Fortunately, they had a plan. The sisters were going to walk him to the gate, and then go up and down the line of ticketed passengers begging someone to give up their seat. So Doctor Lombardi got to watch five nuns go to work on a group of helpless New York businessmen. Some were unmoved, but they finally found their mark. They were just too much for this one guy, who finally relented and gave his ticket to the nuns. They presented it to Lombardi like a trophy. They offered no words, just very satisfied, knowing grins. He figured it was about as close as these nuns were going to get to a high-five.

After 24 hours of flying, Lombardi arrived in Calcutta. It was 100 degrees with 100% humidity. At the airport, he was met by a personal security detail. And by that I mean more nuns. Many, many nuns. They took him directly to the hospital, where he met first with Mother Theresa’s medical team. “Her condition has deteriorated,” the doctors say. When he entered the room to meet the soon-to-be saint for the first time, she beckoned him over as if she wanted to give him a blessing. Instead, she laid down some very clear ground rules.

“I will not leave Calcutta,” she said. “And do not ever disagree with my Indian doctors. I need them. They run my hospitals and clinics, and I will not have them embarrassed.” With clear understanding of what was at stake, Doctor Lombardi examined Mother Theresa for the first time. Like her local doctors, he could find no obvious indicators. He did all of the normal tests and took the typical cultures, but they didn’t say much. Meanwhile, Mother Theresa’s condition continued to worsen.

On the third day, two amazing things happened. First, translucent dewdrops began to appear on one of her blood culture plates. It was an important clue, indicating that a bacterial infection was the likely cause of her sepsis. It all pointed to the likelihood that a pacemaker that had recently been implanted was the cause of Mother Theresa’s problem.

At the same time, a new doctor arrived on the scene. It was the Pope’s personal cardiologist, who had been sent with urgency by the Vatican. He was an impressive sight, right out of central casting... striking head of white hair... bedecked in timeless Roman sartorial splendor —Brioni suit, Hermes tie, Gucci loafers. He was accompanied by two similarly suited Italian diplomats.

When Dr. Lombardi shared his new discovery and theory about the pacemaker, the Italian doctor exploded with righteous indignation. “Out of the question!” He shouted. “This is a clear case of malaria.” The local doctors knew that wasn’t right. If there was one condition they could diagnose well in that part of the world, it was malaria. They knew Mother Theresa didn’t have malaria.

Two days of stalemate came and went. The team was running out of time. Lombardi knew the pacemaker had to come out, so he made his most impassioned plea yet. “Dr. Brioni” countered with an escalation of his own. He stood up and pounded on the table. “If you believe this American upstart,” he bellowed, “I will not be held responsible!”

The Indian doctors asked for privacy to make their decision. They would go with Lombardi, they decided. Without saying another word, the Pope’s doctor packed up his papers, and walked his Gucci’s right out the door. He went directly to the airport, and flew back to Rome.

“Let’s get that pacemaker out,” Lombardi said. The Indian doctors turned back and their demeanor had changed. “If you want it out, you’ll have to take it out.”

“But I’ve never done that before,” Lombardi replied. The doctors did not respond. They just gave him a look that said essentially, “Well, pal, you’re on your own.” Nobody wanted to be held responsible for ending the life of Mother Theresa, especially if the theory ended up being wrong.

So Lombardi found a nurse, got the equipment he needed, and he started the procedure to remove the infected pacemaker. The pacemaker itself came out easily, but the lead or wire that went into her ventricle had become tethered somehow. It would not budge. Lombardi had heard stories about pulling too hard on those wires... that too much force could tear a hole in her heart that would be fatal. In that surreal moment, he found himself praying a prayer to Mother Theresa *for* Mother Theresa. And the moment he did, the lead came loose!

After the procedure, the pacemaker was tested and confirmed to be the source of a bacterial infection. Mother Theresa improved, and Lombardi continued to assist with her care. It turned out that he was the only one who could get her IV’s into her aging, brittle veins. He had learned the skill while, as a medical student in New York, he had volunteered in a clinic in Harlem. The technical skill required to access the hardened, damaged veins of IV drug addicts was something he figured he would never need again. Once again, he proved to be the one doctor Mother Theresa needed most.

In many ways, George Lombardi never felt equipped for the job he was given. He never dreamed that he would be called upon to diagnose and treat a world famous nun... or to go multiple rounds in a battle with the Pope’s doctor... or to stake his career on an educated guess he hoped was right. But he also never imagined that the federal bureaucracy would open its doors to him at 7 a.m. on a Sunday... or that the full staff of the Indian Consulate would line up to help him... or that a gang of persistent nuns would make sure he got on that plane... or that his service to drug addicts in Harlem would give him the exact training he would need to save and preserve the life of Mother Theresa. At every turn, when he needed it most, he was equipped by God with exactly what he needed.

In closing, I want to recall one of the very first sermons I delivered to you. It mentioned a sermon that I once heard my own preacher Joe Mullin give when I was just starting high school. Dr. Mullin was concluding his time as the pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Greensboro, and as he looked back on all that had happened to him there — from the unlikely events that brought him to Greensboro, through all the doubts, uncertainties, and second-guessing he had experienced along the way — he shared one of the most important lessons he had learned. This is what he said: *“If you believe that God is calling you to give yourself to a cause that is greater than you... if you believe that God is calling you to undertake some task or assume some position that is over your head ... if you get a mandate from the Lord to do it, then the Lord is going with you every step of the way --giving you energy, guidance, insight, strength and courage to do what he has called you to do.”*⁴

In short, do not fear... ***you will be equipped for ministry!*** Thanks be to God. **Amen.**

⁴ Joseph B. Mullin, “Now That I Know You Better.” *Grab Life: Sermons from the Pulpit of First Presbyterian Church, Greensboro, North Carolina.* p. 177.