

Many of you have asked about my stole, this vestment that hangs around my shoulders.

The stole came into use about the fourth century and was originally a sort of robe or cloak; but its form was gradually modified until it became a narrow strip.

It is the sign of the pastoral office and was originally made of wool to symbolize the sheep, just like Peter reminds us that we are shepherds of the flock of Christ.

Some say that it was the court uniform of Roman judges, and to have been adopted by the Church to denote the authority of her ministers.

Mine is a take on the clergy tartan, with the St. Andrews cross at the bottom, not as colorful as other stoles I have or those worn by my colleagues in ministry.

It has a very personal meaning for me. And I'm sure Carol could say the same about her stoles; there is a story that goes with the stole.

My stole originally belonged to Bill Hatcher. His wife made it for him.

Bill Hatcher was our family's pastor in a new church development, my minister when I joined the church, my first Executive Presbyter, a mentor, a family friend.

When he died, his wife honored me by giving me this stole.

I've always thought officers should wear stoles on Sunday to identify them, to remind them and us of their authority as spiritual leaders...

Today we ordain and install elders for this congregation, which means you are being given the authority to lead.

And I remind all of you who have been ordained as elders, once ordained always ordained.

I want to consider the source of our authority as elders, how you might answer the question asked of Jesus, “By what authority?”

I want to share three stories about Bill that help us understand the authority by which we lead.

The first story was when I was a young boy and our little church went to our Presbytery camp in North Louisiana for our annual church family fun afternoon and picnic supper, and there was a softball game.

I was in the fifth or sixth grade. Bill was the pitcher. As I strutted to the batter's box, I was thinking, “What does a preacher know about baseball?”

I mean, what does a preacher know about anything that has to do with real life?

Well, I learned what Bill Hatcher knew about real life; he threw overhand, after all, I played Little League! He struck me out! He was more than a preacher; he could play baseball like a real person.

He was human!

You were chosen to lead because of who you are, a child of God; as Dr. Seuss put it: “Today you are you, yes that is true; there is no one alive who is youer than you.”

I've read that one reason so many young people are leaving the church is because they say they can't find real people to lead them into a real faith.

Because we believe in a real God, we need you to lead us into a real faith through your real life.

Just like the disciples on that mountain, they had been with Jesus day and night for three years, and when he said to teach what he commanded them, this was to teach the real life they had with him.

So, in the same way, you lead by the authority coming through your humanity.

The second story was when I received my first call.

Bill had recommended me to this church in a small town, a very small town that wanted to stay that way, in the piney woods of Southwest Arkansas; and when I asked him why there, he simply said, "It's a good place to start."

He was right, and let me be clear, it was not a matter of career-building, first rung on the ministerial ladder.

Bill saw it as matter of always growing, maturing in the faith, of being on a journey for ministry.

It is the power of being a disciple. "Go", Jesus said, and you elders continue down the path the disciples started.

You lead by the authority of your faith journey: The authority that comes from being a disciple of Christ, on the way.

We all have our stories of how we got here, the ways by which God has worked in our lives, and as my friend Carson Mouser said, "Stories help create our identity and connect us to each other.

I wish there was a way the church could hear the stories you shared of your faith journeys, with the mountaintop experiences, the good people along the way, those events that shaped your life.

So, tell someone your story and listen as they tell you theirs."

You lead by the authority that comes from your own journey as a disciple of Christ, the difference faith makes in your life.

And finally, maybe I've told this story before: the day my father was taken into surgery to have a lung removed for cancer, but then the doctors came out and said the cancer had spread, inoperable, terminal.

It was also the day after my 19-year-old sister had returned from M.D. Anderson hospital with the news that her Hodgkin's' disease, which had been in remission, had returned.

As our world was falling apart, we saw Bill Hatcher walking down the hall. I had been in ministry for about three years, and I was so glad to see him.

Because he would know what to say, what prayers to pray that would make this OK, bring comfort to our family.

We sat in the waiting room, and he didn't say anything...no prayers, no words, he just held my mother.

He brought to life what Jesus said to his disciples when he told them, "All authority in and earth has been given to me; and he ended by saying, "I am with you always..."

It is the power of being present that brings trust and hope, courage and compassion for the way, the truth, and the life we are called to lead.

Now let me be clear, we are not perfect in any of this: At times we deny who we are and pretend to be something we're not, we get stuck in in the ruts of how we've always done it, we're not where we need to be when someone needs us.

That's why I believe the most important of the ordination questions to be asked is this: Will you try to show the love and justice of Jesus Christ?

And the emphasis is on TRY! We don't always get it right, but we try!

The real ministry of officers is not done in a session room alone or in commission meetings, but as you accept the call to be the spiritual leaders of this church and lead by the authority of your humanity, your faith journey, and your presence.

I like the way Elton Trueblood put it: "We come not to meet, but to make a difference."

Let me close by offering you this prayer/poem titled "For Service" as a way to remember the authority by which you serve:

*God of our fathers,  
Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,  
God of our mothers,  
Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, and Rachel,  
Open my heart to serve others*

*With joy and thanksgiving.  
Remove ego, judgment, and self-will,  
So that I am present  
with kindness and understanding.  
Make me a tool of Your hand,  
An echo of Your voice,  
And a shining lamp of Your love.  
Grant me the wisdom to offer myself willingly,  
without fear.  
Fill me with compassion and grace,  
Vitality and endurance,  
So that my service becomes a blessing  
In heaven and on earth.  
Blessed are You, God of old,  
You set Your people  
    On a noble path  
To serve with love.  
    (Alden Solovy)*

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.