

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, MI
“On the Road Again: Credentials”
Rev. Dr. John Judson
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Ezra 2:59-63; Luke 3:23-38

It looked like something that would be good to have. It was my first year here at First Presbyterian and I met one of my pastor friends in the parking structure at Beaumont Hospital. Attached to his shirt was a red “clergy badge.” I asked him about it and he said that it was not necessary to visit but that it would get me in after normal visiting hours and into places in the hospital that ordinary mortals were not allowed to go. I then enquired as to where to get one. He told me to go to the chaplain’s office. So, after my hospital visit, I went to apply. When I entered the office and asked about getting a badge, they informed me that they would need to see my credentials. They would need to see my certificate of ordination and a letter from my church, on letterhead, signed by someone other than me. As I walked away, I thought two things. First how was I going to get my certificate of ordination since I had never received one when I was ordained in 1985? The second was, why would anyone want to fake being a pastor just to get one of those little red badges? The first question was answered by the Stated Clerk of my ordaining presbytery who got me my certificate, and by Jan Peters who wrote and signed the letter. The second question was answered, in a way, when I discovered that close to thirty-percent of people lie on their resumes by exaggerating their skills and experience. In other words, people, for any number of reasons, are willing to lie about their credentials to get what they want.

Lying about credentials isn’t anything new. In the ancient world, kings and potentates were always lying about how great they were, the battles they had won, and the kingdoms they had conquered. And evidently there were some priests that it would appear were lying about their credentials in the return to Jerusalem from Babylon. As Ezra puts it, *“The following were those who came up from Tel-melah, Tel-harsha, Cherub, Addan, and Immer, though they could not prove their families or their descent, whether they belonged to Israel.”* What was this all about? Well, there are two things we need to understand about this rather cryptic passage. The first is that the Jews that had been exiled into Babylon remained an intact community by doing two things. First, they made lists of who really belonged to the people of Israel so that they would know who was in and who was out. Second, they kept the Law of Moses in everything that they did. In this way they were not absorbed religiously into the Babylonian world. When they returned home, they looked for priests to serve in the soon to be rebuilt temple, so they checked their lists. They checked their lists to ensure that only the people referenced in Torah were allowed to serve God...and the people mentioned in our morning’s story were not on any of their lists. They had faked their credentials.

Credentials were equally important to the Jews of Jesus’ time as well as to those who ran the Roman Empire. Jews were still doing record keeping of who was in and who was out. The Empire kept records of who was a citizen, who was a slave, who was adopted, and who was natural born. And one’s status in the empire was always tied to these sorts of credentials. This posed a problem for Luke as he was telling his tale about Jesus. This was a problem because on the surface Jesus had no credentials that would lead either Jews or Romans to consider him to be a messiah. All they knew of him was that he was a carpenter, turned traveling teacher, who “supposedly” died and was then

resurrected. While that is somewhat impressive, the people listening to Luke's story would want to know if Jesus had any credentials that would let people know he was worth following. So, Luke offers a genealogy that was intended to satisfy both audiences. For the Jews, Luke begins by saying that Jesus was thirty years old when he began his work, which was the age that priests were when they began to work...so Jesus was spiritually mature and capable of the work. Second Luke ties Jesus to David, the great king. This was critical for a Jewish audience because only a descendant of David could be king, and for many, a messiah. As a side note, the last descendant of David who was acknowledged as a prince of the people, was a man named Zerubbabel, who we read about last week. In other words, it had been four hundred years since a king of Israel had been seen. So here is Jesus, with his lineage credentials tying him to David. For the Roman audience, Luke had to dig a little deeper. Within Roman culture the more ancient one's lineage, the better. The more one could tie oneself to the past, the more respect one was given. Where this led was that many of the emperors had pedigrees that listed gods or goddesses in their family tree. Luke, then, is not about to let any emperor outdo Jesus, and so Jesus' lineage is offered unbroken back to the first human being and to God's own self. While these credentials alone did not bring people into the church, into the Jesus community, they were foundational for assuring Luke's audience that Jesus was worth following.

Where this brings us then is to our own credentials. What are the credentials that we are to take on our journey? The first is a credential for those within the Church. One of the interesting things about the worldwide church is that there are churches and denominations that refuse to recognize our place within the community. There are churches and denominations that claim that they, and they alone, are the true church; that only by joining them, or being baptized like they are baptized, or having the spiritual gifts that they have, can we be true Christians. But my friends, we have credentials. We have our baptisms. I say this because in baptism we have been grafted into Christ. We have been adopted as a child of God. We have been made part of the very body of Christ, the church. We also have the cross. We have our profession of faith in Jesus Christ, that he is Lord and Savior. These two credentials, whether others accept them or not, demonstrate that we are part and parcel of the Jesus' community.

The second credential we have is for the world. Unfortunately, when the world looks at the church and Christians, what it often sees is hatred, condescension, and a community that does not seem to care about anyone other than itself. Our credential to the world then is our service to the least, the lost, and the lonely. Our credential is the service we offer to those outside of our community. It is our work with Angels' Place homes, at Alcott, packing food baskets, serving the homeless, and caring for others. These acts of service are the credentials to the world that we are who we say we are, followers of Jesus, and we do what He has asked us to do. Which, if we read the Book of Acts, also written by Luke, was what drew people into the life of the church. In other words, we serve the world because we are they, and they are us. And as the old hymn states, they will know we are Christians by our love, by our love. This is our credential to the world.

We are now ready for our journey. Two weeks ago, we heard Rev. Bethany talk about the ethical map of John the Baptist. Last week we packed the Story, the Spirit, and the Son. This week we discovered our credentials. And so next week we take our first steps. My challenge to you then is this, to ask yourselves, how am I allowing my credentials to guide who I am and what I do?