

The Ordination of Priests

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Matthew 10: 32-42

Good afternoon!

From the gospel lesson Jesus says, "Those who lose their life for my sake will find it." The great preacher and teacher of preachers Fred Craddock said a sermon must be "clear, compelling and urgent." Jesus hits all three of those marks today: "I bring a sword not peace. I must be to you more than family. Take up the cross and follow me."

Jesus said these words to his disciples in the first days of the church. Call it the ordination sermon of the twelve. He said these things, I think, because He wanted to be clear: When you boil down church, boil down discipleship, boil down even faith to their bare essentials, church, discipleship and faith are about one thing: the worthiness of God! Without God being worth it all, without Jesus showing us He is more than death, without the Spirit ever with us, neither baptism nor ordination nor any of the suffering that comes with them makes any sense!

God is worthy of all we have given and all we could give -- all of us, "ourselves, our souls and bodies," because God is real and able, good and generous. God is worthy of praise not only with our lips but with our lives, because who has a paintbrush like God? Who takes your breath away with sunrises and starry nights, like God? Who hung the sun, moons and planets in place like lights across a patio? Who makes the universe dance its circle dance? We have an answer! Why is God worthy of all the trouble Jesus tells us we are in for if we make him Lord of our lives? Well, because who else whispers and makes life and healing and futures, like God. Who turns garbage into gold like God? And, who else can even assure the dying that they shall surely live again and cry no more? Whose name is more excellent than any other name that can be named?

II.

You can almost hear the newly ordained disciples say, "Don't worry, Lord; we've seen your loving-kindness to us -- your patience, your forgiveness. We've seen you calm storms, feed the hungry and give futures we never would have dared imagine. "Don't worry Lord, we've been confirmed. We've graduated seminary. We'll keep you first!" But what I like about Jesus is that He knows us so well. So well! He knows we suffer from spiritual amnesia sometimes. He knows we often confuse popularity with leadership. He knows that is easier for us to say the words than to be the words. He knows that fear regularly disguises itself as prudence. He knows that it is easier to be nice than it is to tell the truth in love.

But the good news of God in Christ is that there is life and life abundant. And that God, being merciful to us, wants us to know his complete joy. Sure you can be a believer and be happy, if that's all you want to be; but joy is the inheritance of the disciple. So, Jesus insists – for his disciples souls' sake, for you and me, and for the sake of the world – that adoration be followed by oblation, that celebration must renew dedication, and that ceremony is no substitute for service. Jesus insists that some shining and saving contrast be offered to the world through us. We have a treasure in us, even though we are broken vessels.

Can't you hear Jesus saying to all the baptized, down through the hallway of time, "Welcome to the beautiful struggle. Welcome to the joyful rebellion. Don't be surprised, if the world hates you. I have come to bring a sword, not to be nice. They killed me because of love and truth. They killed Alban, back in England, because he thought a Christian should protect the vulnerable. They killed Martin King in Memphis for being nonviolent and wanting a living wage for the poor."

III.

Arlette, Jody, Robert and Shirley: We live in a world that wants you to be church experts, rather than maturing Christian disciples and witnesses. And, yes, we have inherited a church system that wants its priests to be errand boys and girls, rather than disciples making disciples. Resist this with all your might! Resist this with all your might! Define yourself for yourself or you will be crunched into other people's fantasies about faith and church and eaten alive.*

It's like the man who sat down beside a priest on an airplane. The man noticed the suit, collar and cross, and said, "Are you a Christian priest?" The priest answered, "Yes I am." The man went on to say, "As it happens, my hobby is religion. I have read your Bible. And, the entire sixty-six books can be reduced into one phrase: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." The priest said, "Well, that's a good start." Then the priest asked the man, "What do you do?" To which the man said, "I am an astronomer at the planetarium." "Oh," said the priest, "astronomy is my hobby. I have done some reading on the subject. All astronomy can be summarized in just a few words: Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are."

But if it is a song you need to sum up the days ahead as Jesus' disciples, why not choose, one from George Herbert: "Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life: Such a way as gives us breath; Such a truth as ends all strife, Such a life as killeth death." Or go over to Martin Luther: "And though this world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo us, we will not fear, for God hath willed his truth to triumph through us." Or go far back into spiritual music, as far as the psalms, and hear David sing on a day just like today, "In

you O lord have I taken refuge. Be my strong rock, a castle to keep me safe. Into your hands I commend my spirit.”

What the future holds, none of us can know. How the Episcopal Church will adapt to meet our present challenges is not entirely clear. But what remains clear for us is that “Jesus is the same, yesterday, today and forever.” “That nothing shall separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.” That every generation thinks its burdens are the heaviest, but disciples in every age have made the difference. “The souls of the righteous are in the hands of God.” This is the vertical assurance that gives us horizontal endurance!

Yes, we look foolish sometimes, and in some places we look dead. But our hope is full of immortality. Being tested by the fires of this age, we are being found worthy of the faith entrusted to us. That’s the whole point. Surely a God this real, this generous, this trustworthy, is deserving of faithful disciples. What a compliment you and I have been paid to be included in God’s mission to the world, lay and ordained alike. Right here, right now. A God this good deserves devoted disciples.

What gives our ministry buoyancy? Why do we rejoice? Why is Jesus worth all the trouble? Because in Him, there’s still help for the helpless. There is hope for the hopeless. There is life for the lifeless. God is a friend to the friendless. God can mend your broken pieces, cause you to live and be blessed. “O for a thousand tongues to sing, my great redeemer’s praise, the glory of my God and King, the triumphs of his grace.”
AMEN

*Paraphrasing Audre Lorde

