

THE TREASURE IN EARTHEN VESSELS

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The gathering of a congregation for the public worship of God is always a time of joy and celebration, an occasion for remembering and rehearsing the sentiments that sustain us as members of the Christian community of faith. So, on this Sunday, as on every Sunday, we are gathered here to worship God, to express our gratitude for the lives He has given us, to reaffirm our commitment to His purposes, to seek new understandings of what it means to be in the world as Christians, and to re-dedicate ourselves to the faith, hope, and love that have, for us, been supremely revealed in the life, teachings and ministry of Jesus Christ. In that respect, this Sunday is like every other Sunday, and that is as it should be. Yet, this Sunday marks something that is quite special in the life of the congregation. For we are assembled today to celebrate, and to affirm through the official act of ordination, the calling of one of our members to a life of full-time service as a clergy-person in the Christian Church-Disciples of Christ. Rightly understood, the ceremony of ordination is one that involves all of us, and not just the person being ordained, for it is an act of the whole community, an act in which both those who ordain, and the one who is ordained, are reminded of our solemn responsibilities.

What are we *doing* when we ordain someone so that he or she is authorized to perform the *special* tasks of ministry that fall to the lot of the clergyperson? I find it illuminating to reflect on the answer to this question given by H. Richard Niebuhr. "A call to the ministry," Niebuhr suggests, "includes at least these four elements: (1) the call to be a Christian, which is variously described as the call to discipleship of Jesus Christ, to hearing and doing . . . the word of God . . . (2) the *secret* call, namely, that inner persuasion or experience whereby a person feels . . . directly summoned or invited by God to take up the work of the ministry; (3) the *providential* call, which is that invitation . . . to assume the work of the ministry which comes through the equipment of a person with the talents necessary for the exercise of the office and through the divine guidance of . . . life in all its circumstances; (4) the *ecclesiastical* call, that is, the . . . invitation extended . . . by some community or institution of the Church to engage in the work of ministry."¹ When we ordain a person to the

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¹Niebuhr, H. Richard, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry* (New York, Harper & Brothers, 1956), p. 64.

ministry, then, we are saying that we regard that person as one who has Christian convictions, who has a personal sense of vocation, and who has shown evidence that he or she has the necessary intellectual, moral, physical and psychological gifts. The act of ordination, then, recognizes these characteristics in the life of a person, and on that basis invites him or her to assume, in a special and official way, the work of the ministry. This is the invitation we give today.

But now we must ask, what should be said to one to whom we now extend such a significant invitation? As I reflected on this question, I concluded that the basic theme for what I should say must be the words of St. Paul, who in the second of his letters to the church at Corinth says, "For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us." These words call our attention to the fact that in the Christian community we do indeed have treasure, but they also remind us that the treasure is always carried in the earthen vessels of our finitude, our fallibility and our mortality. In what follows, then, I shall say something about that treasure, and about the fragile and easily broken containers in which we carry it. I hope it will be clear that I am speaking not only to the ordinand, who will from this day forward bear a special responsibility for it, but to all of us, for we are each members of the community in which the treasure is to be found.

The treasure we have has been variously understood and interpreted down through the centuries of Christian history. There are many ways in which one might speak meaningfully of it, and each of them has its own relevance and significance. I have found it helpful to see the treasure in terms of four rubrics namely as a *mystery*, as a *story*, as a *community*, and as a *dream*.

The treasure in earthen vessels, seen as a mystery, refers to our participation in the Eternal mystery of God, our continuing quest to penetrate the veil of awe and wonder, and sometimes of darkness, that surrounds our life in the world. Our faith assures us that God *is*, that He is love, and that we can know him supremely in the Incarnation, His being in the world in Jesus Christ. That is indeed a treasure, but we have it in earthen vessels because we often do not know how to accept and use it. We see, but always through a glass darkly. We can often say, as St. Augustine did of his understanding of God, "our hearts are restless until they find rest in Thee," but not always. Our

quest for the meaning of life, and for our place in it, sometimes leaves us with the sense of chaos, so that, as anthropologist Clifford Geertz has put it, "the strange opacity of certain . . . events, the dumb senselessness of intense or inexorable pain, and the enigmatic unaccountability of gross iniquity all raise the uncomfortable suspicion that perhaps the world and hence man's life in the world has no genuine order at all—no . . . regularity no emotional form, no moral coherence."² The response we make to this suspicion, in the light of our faith, is "the formulation, by means of (Christian) symbols, of an image of . . . a genuine order of the world which will account for, and even celebrate, the perceived ambiguities, puzzles, and paradoxes in human experience."³ The ability to make that response is certainly a part of the treasure we have in the church. Yet our hold upon it is never quite firm, and it can so easily slip from our hands. One task of the ministry, then, is surely that of being an enabler for men and women who want to find this part of the treasure, and to be engaged in the never-ending process of achieving new and deeper understandings of what it means for our life.

A second way to view the treasure is to see it as a *story*. Certainly, a valued part of the treasure understood as a story can be expressed in some of the words of an old hymn many of us learned to cherish when we were yet children—"I love to tell the story, of unseen things above, of Jesus and His glory, of Jesus and His love." But the story includes much more than this, and the words of the hymn tell only a small part of it. The treasure here is the Judeo-Christian story, the story of God as creator, redeemer, and judge. It is the story of the God who brings worlds into being, who creates us in His own image, who judges us when we distort His image by forgetting what He expects of us and when we violate the covenant He made with us from the beginning, who redeems us to the possibilities of a new life, a new creation, by His gracious gift in Jesus Christ. Thus it is the story of the creation, the fall, the exodus from bondage, the story of ancient kings and priests and prophets, the story of the crucifixion, death, and resurrection of the one who was sent as a messenger of the good news about the abundant life that God wanted for his creatures. It is the story of Adam and Eve, of Noah, of Moses, of Joshua and David, of Amos, Micah, Jeremiah, Isaiah, of Paul and Jesus.

A story like this is of profound significance, because in it are to

²Geertz, Clifford, in Banton, Michael, (Ed.) *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion* (London, Tavistock Publications, 1966), p. 23.

³*Ibid.* Word in brackets added by the writer.

be found all the ingredients of the human story itself—all the victories and defeats, all the pain and suffering, all the joys and sorrows, all the failures and successes, all the sins and virtues, the depths of degradation and the heights of aspiration that are a part of our experience—they are all there, and the story in which they are told is surely a treasure. Once again, however, we have the treasure in earthen vessels. The difficulty is, of course, that we have often learned the story all too well, and we are not really listening anymore. I suspect that we never come to understand the story at all unless we come to see it as *our* story. When the story becomes one in the light of which we see our experience in the world, and not one that tells us about the lives of other people, then we can perhaps begin to understand what is really meant when we speak of the biblical tradition as the word of God. This too is not an easy thing to do, for the story is often told in difficult, and sometimes esoteric, language that needs to be reinterpreted if we are to make its vocabulary, grammar, and syntax our own. Another task of ministry, then, is that of helping people to learn to *speak* the language of the Christian story, and to *hear* it in ways that will illumine and deepen their understanding of themselves and the world in which they live.

A third way to look at the treasure is to see it as a *community*. The community of faith in which we participate in the church is a community of *memory*, when it re-enacts and celebrates the treasure as mystery and story; it is a community of *aspiration* and *hope*, when it looks to the future with confidence and trust in the integrity of the world which is its gift from God; it is a community of *divine love* when it acts as an agent of grace, redemption, and reconciliation, both within itself and in the world outside. Seen in this way, such a community is something very special indeed. But the treasure we have in that community too is carried in earthen vessels. It will not continue to exist merely because it has become traditional. Lyle Schaller, in a recent book entitled *Understanding Tomorrow*, has said very well what needs to be said about this. Schaller points out that “the burden for developing the loyalty of a new generation to any institution rests on the institution, not on the parents . . . loyalty must be earned, it is not automatically inherited . . . Those institutions which depend on people’s loyalty as a heritage are in deep trouble.”⁴ He is right, of course. The treasure as community is carried in earthen vessels, because its memory is too often distorted and faulty, because its aspirations and hopes are too likely to be filled with self-concern, and because its love is too narrow and its work of reconciliation too timid

⁴Schaller, Lyle, *Understanding Tomorrow* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1967), p. 86.

and halting. So a third task of ministry is that of reminding people that what we hold precious could be lost if we treat it as a collection of valued heirlooms and antiques, rather than as the furniture of the household of faith.

Finally, we need to reflect on the treasure as a *dream*. The dream I have in mind concerns the meaning for our time of the phrase in the Lord's prayer which says, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven." When I translate that phrase into contemporary language, I see it as a reference to the dream that we shall some day have a society in which a full and abundant life as authentic persons will be possible for every human being. Part of what this means is surely that we must grow in our ability to discern the signs of the times, to involve ourselves emphatically in what is happening in the world. The central image here is the one suggested by the word *liberation*. Let the voice of one who has spoken about the dream more movingly than any other contemporary Christian, Martin Luther King, say a word to us about this. Dr. King has composed an imaginary letter of St. Paul to American Christians. This, in part, is what he has Paul saying to us. "You must never allow the transitory, evanescent demands of man-made institutions to take precedence over the eternal demands of the Almighty God. In a time when men are surrendering the high values of the faith you must cling to them, and despite the pressure of an alien generation preserve them for children yet unborn. You must be willing to challenge unjust mores, to champion unpopular causes, and to buck the status quo. You are called to be the light of the world. You are to be that vitally active leaven in the lump of the nation."⁵

Let a voice from the oppressed peoples of the Third World also speak to us about this. Gustavo Gutierrez writes, in *A Theology of Liberation*, that the theology we need is one which "does not stop with reflecting on the world, but rather tries to be part of the process through which the world is transformed. It is a theology which is open—in the protest against trampled human dignity, in the struggle against the plunder of the vast majority of people, in liberating love, and in the building of a new, just, and fraternal society—to the gift of the Kingdom of God."⁶ That such a theology is a way of speaking about the treasure as dream is apparent all around us. The cry for liberation that is in the voices of Blacks, Chicanos, and American Indians, to say nothing of women and youth, and perhaps other

⁵King, Martin Luther, Jr., *Strength to Love* (New York, Pocket Books, 1964), p. 158.

⁶Gutierrez, Gustavo, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, New York, Orbis Press, 1973), p. 15.

groups as well, in our own society, and the desperate yearnings of the oppressed and the starving in other parts of the world, are vivid reminders that the dream of the kingdom of God, of the society in which authentic dignity and real personhood are possible for every human being, is far from being a reality. That dream is, surely, a part of the treasure we celebrate on this day of ordination.

Once more, however, we have the treasure in earthen vessels, for our faith is so often not deep enough, our hope is not sure enough, and our love is not big enough to enable us to pay the cost of realizing that dream. Even so, the vision that the dream expresses is so compelling that we cannot let it go, and it makes its claim upon us even when we would like to forget it. A fourth task of ministry, then, is to enable people to find ways to act out their faith, to become a part of the company of men and women who redeem the times, and whose acts of reconciliation and liberating love are a living symbol of the kingdom of God in our midst.

By this time, I am sure that the ordinand must be saying to himself something like "this is impossible; how can a minister do all these things?" And if so, he is right to ask the question. What we have talked about under the rubrics of mystery, story, community, and dream constitutes the agenda for a life-time of ministry. More than this, the agenda I have outlined is not the business of the clergy alone. It is the business of each member of the community of faith. We could even say that this agenda is too important to be left to the clergy by themselves. We can ask only that those who are ordained exercise their spiritual, moral, intellectual, and psychological gifts and skills in such a way that they become enablers for those who must do the real work of ministry—the laymen and laywomen who act out, in the world, whatever understanding they may have of the agenda for the Christian community of faith.

These reflections on the theme of the treasure in earthen vessels have, from the beginning, been based upon the assumption that ordination to the Christian ministry is an act of the whole congregation. I think that it is appropriate to conclude this process of reflection with some words taken from the letter to the church at Ephesus, which, it seems to me, say to the ordinand what this congregation wants to say to him, and what he might want to say to us. "Stand therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the equipment of the gospel of peace; above all taking the shield of faith. . . . And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Pray at all times in the Spirit . . . To that end keep alert with

all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, and also for me, that utterance may be given me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains; that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.”⁷ Amen.

⁷Ephesians 6:14-20 (RSV)

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