

Ordination Sermon

The Rev. Anthony Ray Hiatt

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“And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here am I! Send me.” (Is 6:8)

Any sermon this week that fails to take note of the Easter season would be making a serious omission, so...

Halleluia! Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed. Halleluia! (I just don't think we can say that enough.)

Anyone who has ever attended an ordination in the Episcopal Church likely has heard this passage from Isaiah. We know that the prophet has been caught up in a mystical state into the presence of God, with the cherubim and seraphim in attendance. I want you to remember that these creatures are not benign birds or rococo fat babies; they are phantasmal, otherworldly, and almost nightmarish in appearance. That Isaiah lives through this experience of seeing “the King, the Lord of hosts” is remarkable enough, as the expectation was that to see God would be a death sentence. But to be cleansed by the action of one of the seraphim in his vision is truly miraculous. Is it any wonder then that when the voice cries out for an emissary, Isaiah is more than willing to volunteer, even though he is not fully aware of all that will be expected of him as God's “mouthpiece?”

There is a certain naiveté that surrounds Isaiah at this point in his life. Does he know that he will be required to challenge the powers that be, i.e. King Ahaz? Or that he will present prophecies which will be rejected? Or that he himself will be ridiculed and rejected? That he, by offering his life to God's service, will lose himself in the process? Was I speaking of Isaiah or Tony? Or both? Or all who accept God's call to service? Yes!

In the lore of the Anglican culture, there is a somewhat romantic image of the parish priest who celebrates the sacraments, cares for those entrusted to his charge, studies scripture and prays the Offices, and is beloved by all in the village. An Anglican "Father Brown mysteries" sort of a chap, without all the murders, of course. Perhaps there was such a time when that image prevailed, but no longer are the majority of Americans active Christians—or even believers at all. Spiritual but not religious you know trumps faithfulness to Christ in the Church today.

Congregations are composed of individuals who are on a wide spectrum of advancement in their spiritual journey. It would be wonderful if everyone in any given parish were completely focused on a common goal of bringing in the Kingdom of God, or restoring "all people to unity with God and each other in Christ" as our catechism says, or even completely funding the budget for next year. But such is never the case. There are some who, even after decades in the parish are still seekers—maybe even a little bit agnostic. Congregations are more like the parish in the Vicar of Dibley series from BBC than any other fictional representation of

which I am aware. Anyone who has ever been a part of an Episcopal parish knows that we are a strange collection of pious and impious, faithful and backsliding, supporters of the parish and under-miners of any and everything the clergy and vestry propose. And yet God's hand and call have been extended to each and to all.

The choice to offer one's life in the service of God is rarely done impetuously, and almost always with a good bit of prayer, meditation, and conversation with family and close friends, and the support of a fellowship of believers. And that conversation does not cease once one engages ministry, either as lay or ordained. Without the support of a community of believers, no one can effectively or faithfully be a witness to the God of love who we profess.

I know a bit about the early stirrings of God's call on the life of Tony Hiatt, how he struggled to accept that call, and the overwhelming care of the community of the combined churches and people of the Episcopal Diocese of Fort Worth. I know that Tony and Lydia took a risk when he entered seminary at Brite Divinity School, spending much of his available time in prayer and study, while continuing to hold a full time job. And even that was not enough, as Tony helped restart Episcopal Cursillo in Fort Worth, as well as ministering in his parish, occasionally assisting with music in Parker County, and bringing God's love to many who have little or no church connection. But like Isaiah, Tony responded with, "Here am I; send me." And we are all the better for that decision.

Blessedly, in The Episcopal Church, we are coming to understand that call and ministry do not equate to ordination. For at least 50 years there has been a movement to draw us back to the biblical understanding of ministry as that which Christians do. St. Paul in several places—specifically I Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4—lists gifts of the spirit which “equip the saints {that’s every one of us, brothers and sisters} for the work of ministry for the building up of the Body of Christ.” Does that mean that the ordained are superfluous? Absolutely not! Clergy—deacons, priests, and even bishops—are absolutely essential for the ordering of the Church, from the congregational to the diocesan to the provincial, to the Communion level. Each order may be seen as an icon—an image—of a part of ministry in which the whole community participates.

Deacons are icons of servant-hood. They are not to be the only servants; deacons hold up the servant-hood of Christ and call each of us to become servants, especially to the hurting, the lonely, the outcast, fulfilling Christ’s command to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, visit the sick and those in prison. If the congregation is not being exhorted to participate in that aspect of ministry, deacons are remiss.

Priests are icons of gathering and storytelling. Sacraments are celebrated within the context of the biblical narrative, and the priest gathers the community to hear the sacred, healing story of God’s forgiving love and thus to receive spiritual nourishment. That same gathering and storytelling occurs—or at least should occur—both within

family life and between and among friends in what I call “little ‘s’ sacraments”. If you are not being lead to be a story telling gatherer, the priests need to get back to their work of teaching that all life is sacramental.

Bishops are icons of connection. One of the medieval titles in Latin for bishop was *pontifex*--bridge builder. Bishops are bridges between congregations within a diocese, between dioceses and between the church of the past, the present and the future. But again, bridge building is a task for all of us, not just for me or Bishop High or his successor. If you are not building bridges between individuals and groups in your life and community, I am not doing my job of calling you to be a connector.

Ministry is what we Christians do. Sometimes we do it well, and sometimes we fail to proclaim the Risen Lord Jesus. Benchmarks of success are fine for management, but faithfulness is our only standard for ministry. We are not called to be successful; we are called to be faithful. Ministry flows out of that faithfulness that loves the unlovable, offers forgiveness, and bears another’s burdens.

THE CHARGE

There is a customary part of an ordination sermon that is called The Charge. The preacher asks the ordinand to stand and reminds him or her of the responsibility which they will be given. Tony, please stand.

In the book of Exodus, when Aaron is set apart as the first High Priest, the Hebrew word usually translated ordain actually means “to fill the hands.” If you don’t know it yet,

your hands are going to be “lip-brimming” full. You will have more to do than any one person can possibly accomplish in 100 hour work weeks—and that doesn’t even include your money making job--and you will be tempted to fill your hands with non-essentials—such as iPhone, iPad, Day-Timer. Fill your hands instead with Bible, Prayer Book, Chalice and Paten, and Healing Oil stock.

I want you to hear what I am about to say and remember it for the rest of your life. In the Examination in just a few minutes you will be exhorted to “love and serve the people among whom you work...” That means all of them, not just a few, and not just your friends. Love is a choice; make sure you love especially those that disagree with you and those that you don’t like. That may be the most difficult action you take, but you must love the people among whom you serve. They will know whether you love them or not and will respond accordingly. The most painful words I ever heard was from a congregation who said to me, “Our priest doesn’t love us.”

You will not have the opportunity to spend your entire day and week sitting in an office, piously waiting for parishioners to come and learn from your deep well of wisdom. Because you spend much of your time away from the parish church, you will have an opportunity that most full-time clergy do not have: you will be a part of many communities and will be able to bring the Good News into the empty desert of many lives. I challenge you to encourage the parishioners among whom you work to get out of the church ghetto to see the needs around them, and

then do what they can to meet those needs. Show us through your life by being “out and about” what it means to be in the world but not of it. Teach us to be witnesses for Christ in all ways.

Did I say love the people among whom you work? I cannot stress that enough, so it’s worth saying again.

Do not forget your beloved Lydia. Remember you entered the institution of marriage long before you took vows for ordination. She will never let you forget who you are, sometimes to your elation and sometimes to deflate an overly enlarged ego. But always set aside time for her; after God she is most important.

Finally lose the possessive ‘my’ when referring to ministry. It is not YOUR ministry. Ministry belongs to Christ and you have the extreme privilege of participating. It may take a while to let go of this last habit as it is used ubiquitously, but begin tomorrow to train yourself to speak of “the parish I serve” or the “work of priesthood” or whatever. Do not speak of “my priesthood” or “my ministry.”

Now I ask the congregation to stand as you are able; I have a few words of exhortation for you also. I want to congratulate your Bishop, rector and vestry for having the great insight of calling Tony to serve among you. Obviously I hold him in great esteem, and I want the very best for him as he learns to wear the mantle which has been cast on him. Earlier this morning you made a vow to support Tony, so now I call you to help him grow to be the very best priest in the western Hemisphere. Challenge him to stretch further

than he thinks he might; love him when he excels as well as when he fails; laugh with him and cry with him; and pray for him—a lot—he's going to need it to continue to learn, and grow, and mature. Help him remember why he fell in love with Jesus and the Church, and be for him icons of Christ's love. And be the Body of Christ together, that the broken and hurting people in this part of Fort Worth may experience the Good News of God's unconditional love and forgiveness through you all.

Amen.