

Called to be Servants: An Ordination Sermon

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Psalm 119:1-8

Acts 6:1-7

Luke 12:35-40



As a theology professor, I have many favorite moments. I love the first day of class in the fall when I meet new students for the first time and we go over the syllabus for the next semester. I love those moments in class when a lecture or discussion is going particularly well and I find myself thinking “This is why I love teaching.” I love lunches in the Commons Hall when I’m sitting together with students or faculty and we’re laughing together. I love that moment at the end of graduation when all of the faculty process out of St. Stephen’s Church wearing our academic regalia and we look back at the faces of the graduating seniors and the hundreds of parents and friends who have come to celebrate. But I think that this is my absolute favorite moment – when I attend the ordination of former students whom I have seen come to the seminary as new students, watched them become part of the Trinity community and progress in their coursework and spiritual formation over a period of years, and, finally, after graduation, the church recognizes their

vocation when the bishop lays his hands on them and prays for them to "Receive the Holy Spirit" for the ministry to which they have been called. I want to thank Jared and Rebecca for inviting me to preach this sermon, and Bishop Duncan for allowing me to share in this service.

I first became acquainted with Rebecca and Jared on separate occasions. I became acquainted with Rebecca because of an email she sent out on "Campus News" asking if anyone could help her to locate some poison berries she needed. My wife Jennie knew where some were growing so she emailed back, and I assume Rebecca got her berries. Jared and I are both alive so the berries went for a harmless purpose. As many of you know, Rebecca knits and she needed the berries to make a dye for her yarn. My first real acquaintance with Jared began during a walk for coffee after lunch that I took with Professor Leander Harding, who invited Jared along. During that walk, we asked Jared about why he had come to seminary, and we found out during that talk that Jared saw his vocation as a shared vocation with his wife Rebecca. Some students come to seminary, and their spouses come along as well. Jared made clear that Rebecca and he had come together, and that they shared a common vision of ministry as something to do together. I got to know Jared and Rebecca over the next several years as they were students in my classes, and both were exceptionally good students. For the first couple of years they were here, both worshiped at Grace Edgeworth where Jennie and I attend, and I found out that they were not only good students but very good cantors. Jared and Rebecca struggled to have children, and we all rejoiced when first Naomi and now Martha were born. Jared and Rebecca formed friendships with students whom I got to know as friends as well, and some of them are here today. I can honestly say that I do not only think of Jared and Rebecca as my students, but as special friends whom I have come to love and respect. I am greatly honored to be able to preach at their ordination to the diaconate this morning.

What to say about ordination to the diaconate? I do not have time to give an entire lecture on the theology of ordination so I am going to focus on just one issue: what is the nature of ordained ministry and how is this particularly reflected in the office of deacon?

People are very suspicious of the ordained ministry, and there are some valid reasons. The sexual abuse scandals in the Roman Catholic Church in recent decades are a good starting point, but there are examples from other churches as well. During the 1980's, a number of television evangelists were involved in very messy and very public abuses of their ministries. Those of us who are Anglicans have lived through a church split in the last decade; churches and dioceses have left the Episcopal Church; there have been court fights over church property. Bishops and clergy have been deposed. Even in the last few weeks, the Episcopal Church has made decisions at its General Convention that have resulted in public protest from other parts of the Anglican Communion. Trinity School for Ministry trains students who are Anglicans and students who are Episcopalians, and we faculty and students find ourselves on both sides of this divide. And it is painful.

Western culture is also suspicious of authority in general. There's been a t-shirt slogan going around for quite awhile now that reads "Question Authority!" To which the only proper response is: "Says who?" Dictionary definitions of the word "authority" usually associate it with power, control, and the ability to enforce obedience. In modern democratic societies we like to distinguish between absolute authority based on arbitrary power – the authority of tyrants, and democratic authority – authority that is based on the consent of the governed. What all modern notions of authority have in common is that they are subjective. They are based on the personal power and ability to command obedience exercised by some human beings over others. Those human beings might be single individuals (in the case of dictators), or they might be

charismatic leaders, or they might be democratically elected, but the basis of their authority lies in their human identity, whether that of single individuals or perhaps groups of individuals. We rightly distrust this kind of authority because we recognize that human beings are flawed; we're selfish; we overreach, and we tend to look after our own interests. As Lord Acton stated, "Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

So how does ordained Christian ministry differ from this common notion of authority, a power to control other people based on some particular person's subjective human identity? In order to help make my point I'm going to distinguish between authority and office. I recognize that this is an overly simple distinction. The risen Jesus states in the Great Commission of Matthew 28 "All authority in heaven and earth has been given unto me." During the ordination service this morning, Rebecca and Jared promise to obey their bishop and others who have "authority" over them. So perhaps I could distinguish between two different notions of authority. For simplicity's sake, however, I am going to distinguish between authority in the sense of a control over others based on one's subjective human identity and what I am going to call "office."

What do I mean by "office"? An office is a kind of authority in the sense that those who have office can exercise various kinds of skills or power to get things done, but an office is delegated. A person who exercises an office is not exercising power based on his or her own subjective identity; rather, an office-holder has a particular task to perform and exercises skill or power only in performing that task. In addition, an office-holder receives that task from someone else, and is answerable to that someone else. As a teacher, I can exercise a certain kind of power in my classroom. I give lectures, I can require class assignments, I can give students grades, and I can even fail a student if they do not do the work I assign.

However, I don't do this based on my own authority as an individual. I have been delegated this responsibility by the seminary, and I have done things like get a Ph.D. to make sure I am qualified. As a teacher, I have to base my judgment on standards of learning that I did not invent. When I grade students, my grading is supposed to be based on their performance, not on whether I happen to like them. What I can request of my students inside the classroom has no bearing on what might happen outside the classroom. So when they were students I could not have requested that Jared and Rebecca mow my lawn to get extra credit in class.

This notion of ordination as delegated office is helpful not only in helping to understand what makes ordination distinctive, but also in helping to distinguish church orders from the common notion of authority, and even to challenge it. So first, ordination is delegated, and delegated in a very specific sense that makes it very different from other kinds of jobs. Specifically, we see the delegated nature of ordination in the concept of vocation. In the ordination service, the bishop asks the ordinand: "Do you believe that you are truly called, according to the will of our Lord Jesus Christ, and in accordance with the Canons of this Church, to the ministry of the same?" This notion that there are particular individuals that God has called to specific ministries is so central to the biblical narratives that biblical scholars have a name for it: the "call narrative." God appears to Abraham and calls him to leave his home and his family and to go to a new land. (Gen. 12:1). God appears to Moses in the burning bush and calls him to rescue the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 3). Beginning with Samuel, the ministry of the prophets of the Old Testaments always begins with a call. In the reading from Jeremiah this morning, we hear one such call narrative. God appears to Jeremiah and tells him to deliver his message: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations. . .

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This same pattern of the call narrative continues in the New Testament. The baptism of Jesus follows the traditional pattern with one major exception. Jesus is not called simply as a prophet but as God’s beloved Son. All four of the gospels begin Jesus’ ministry with the calling of his disciples, and in John’s version of the last supper narrative, Jesus says to his apostles: “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide . . .” (John 15:16). The pattern continues in the book of Acts, beginning with the calling of Matthias to replace Judas, but also in this morning’s passage describing the beginnings of the office of deacon. The disciples choose seven men who are “full of the Holy Spirit” and lay hands on them. The office of deacon is a delegated office in two senses. First, the deacons are recognized and chosen by the church – they do not choose themselves – but the context makes clear that they have received their delegation not just from the church, but from God, just as all the traditional call narratives point to a calling from God.

This understanding that ordained ministry is a vocation, a calling from God, challenges the contemporary understanding of authority in at least three senses. First, if vocation is a calling from God it is not based on our own self-importance or charismatic capabilities. As Jesus told his apostles, we do not choose this office; Jesus chooses us. Second, because ordained ministry is a divine calling, ordained clergy are answerable to God for their charges. Jesus says in Matthew 18:6, “but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.” In the pastoral letters, the apostle Paul gives instructions to his own delegates Timothy and Titus about just how important their responsibilities are to their congregations. Finally, because ordination is a vocation from

God, ordained clergy always need to be aware that they are responsible not to deliver their own opinions to their congregation, but God's own word. Quoting again the passage from Jeremiah, "Behold, I have put my words in your mouth. See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant." (Jer. 1:10).

Jared and Rebecca each affirm this morning: "I do believe the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God and to contain all things necessary to salvation; and therefore I hold myself bound to conform my life and ministry thereto, and do solemnly engage to conform to the Doctrine, Discipline and Worship of Christ as this Church has received them." It is because vocation means that clergy have to deliver a divine word and not their own subjective opinions that the church requires this confession.

Rebecca and Jared understand well the importance of vocation to ministry. I am going to relate an event that most of you probably do not know about. Before Naomi was born, Jared and Rebecca invited some special friends to their home to help them assess whether they indeed had a joint vocation to ordained ministry. I was invited along with my wife Jennie. Our friend and faculty member Martha Giltinan was there. Rebecca's parents and her youngest sister were there along with two fellow students, Noel and Greg Pfeiffer-Collins. We talked, we prayed, and Martha in particular laid hands on Rebecca and prayed for her unborn child, whose name we did not yet know would be Naomi. I am sure that night meant a lot to Rebecca and Jared, but it also meant a lot to me that they placed such trust in us. I truly wish that our dear friend Martha could be here to see the fruition of that evening, but her namesake is here, in Jared and Rebecca's youngest daughter, named after Martha.

So that is the first way in which ordained ministry is different from the way in which our society understands

authority: vocation.

The second way in which ordained ministry differs from our current culture's understanding of authority has to do with mission. The notion of "mission" has been picked up from the church by the culture, and secular businesses now have "mission statements." But what is the real mission statement of a company like Apple Computer? Something like "to sell more tablets and cell phones than our competitors so that we can bring in more profits to our stock holders." The church has a very different understanding of mission, and because ordained clergy act on behalf of the church, they share the same mission, which has been so helpfully stated in the words of the "Blues Brothers": "We're on a mission from God!"

This notion that the church is on a "mission from God" has become so popular these days that theologians have coined a Latin name for it: *missio dei*, which sounds much more intellectual than quoting the Blues Brothers. The mission of God begins with the persons of the Trinity – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – who created the world and human beings in the image of God in order to share with us the love of the divine life. Humans have lost their way, however, and rather than living in harmony with one another and with our Creator, we have turned each one to doing his or her own thing, and that is what the Bible means by sin. It is interesting how this understanding of sin as individual human beings pursuing their own interests rather than living in harmony sounds a whole lot like the individualism that modern secular culture both idolizes and fears. Because we value our own autonomy, we tend to fear the same kind of autonomy that we value for ourselves when we find it in our leaders: "Question authority!" because when people get in charge they use their freedom and autonomy to expand their own territory at the expense my own freedom and autonomy. If it is not obvious, there is a huge contradiction at the heart of contemporary culture. Modern people may not believe there is

such a thing as original sin, but they butt their heads against it day in and day out.

In response to the mess we have made of the world, God has set out to “set things right” (in the language that N.T. Wright uses so often) first, by creating a new people – the nation of Israel – and then by becoming incarnate as a human being himself in the person of Jesus Christ. In Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, he delivers human beings from our sin and selfishness, and inaugurates God’s kingdom. After his resurrection, Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to the church. The Holy Spirit indwells this community of the church which is the expansion of God’s people Israel to include the Gentiles – and the Holy Spirit indwelling the church becomes the place where the triune God shares the divine life with God’s people in Word and Sacrament. The church has its own vocation: it is the community that is called to live out the harmony that God intended for creation as we look forward in hope to the kingdom that will fully be established when Jesus returns. Because Jared and Rebecca have spent several years studying in seminary, they know all this, but you can get the short version when we recite the Creed this morning.

What does ordination have to do with this “mission from God”? Throughout the Bible it is clear that God has chosen certain select individuals (I have already spoken of the notion of “vocation”) to speak God’s word to his people, to lead his people in worship, and to minister to the spiritual needs of God’s people. In the Old Testament, there were priests and prophets. In the New Testament, we are told that Jesus Christ fulfills perfectly the Old Testament offices of prophet, priest, and king, but Jesus also chose apostles who followed him during his earthly mission and whom he sent out to continue his mission after his resurrection. Finally, the New Testament speaks of various charismatic gifts and offices that are exercised in the church, and especially of the offices of bishops, priests or presbyters, and deacons. Those who hold

church office are not about performing any other mission than the *missio dei* that is the task that God accomplishes through the entire church, but they have a specific delegated office within the church that others do not have. Rebecca and Jared, the ordination service speaks of this divine office to which you have been called: "Almighty God, who by your divine providence has appointed diverse Orders of Ministers in your Church, and who inspired your Apostles to choose into the Order of Deacons the first martyr Stephen, with others; mercifully behold these your servants now called to the same Office and Administration." The historic Reformation understanding of church office refers to a ministry of Word and Sacrament, and traditional discussions of ministry also discuss the pastoral ministry you have to your flock. The ordination service mentions all three. You are called "to assist the Priest in public worship. . . to baptize and to preach." You are also called "to work with the laity in searching for the sick, the poor, and the helpless, that they may be relieved." Word, sacrament, and pastoral ministry: that is the essence of church office. That is the heart of what you are called to do. Ordained clergy may have many other talents and gifts, and you may find yourselves doing all kinds of other things – perhaps you'll have a knitting ministry or a software support ministry – but remember that this is your main task. Everything else, as the expression goes, is "gravy." Do not neglect the task of word, sacrament, and pastoral care. Do not allow yourselves to be distracted from this task by other good things you might be asked or tempted to do, but that are not your main task.

Finally, there is a third aspect to ordained ministry that is in stark contrast to the way that contemporary culture understands authority and the way that the church understands "office," and it is particularly illustrated by the office of deacon. The English word "deacon" is simply a transliteration of the Greek word *diakonos*, which means "servant." In the passage we read from Acts this morning, we are told that the

original seven deacons had the specific ministry of “serving tables.” In other words, they were doing the most basic grungy kind of ministry.

In theological writings concerning ordained ministry, it is sometimes said that the ordained “represent Christ,” that they act “in the person of Christ.” This notion of the priest as an ambassador or representative of Christ is easily misunderstood, and some are suspicious of the notion because they fear that it means that ordained ministry is about exercising an unwarranted God-like power and authority over congregations. But that really reflects a serious misunderstanding of what it means for clergy to represent Christ. Jesus himself spoke of the kind of authority that he expected his followers to exercise. In Mark 10:42, Jesus responded to his disciples’ quarreling about which one was the greatest by making clear what he expected of them: “You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

At the heart of the apostle Paul’s theology is his own notion of what he understands it to mean to imitate or resemble Jesus Christ. The New Testament scholar Michael Gorman refers to this as Paul’s pattern of “cruciformity,” and he argues that Philippians 2:3-5 is the key passage for understanding Paul’s theology: “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” There’s that notion of servanthood again. Paul

applies this notion to his own ministry when he discusses how it is that he himself as an apostle resembles and represents Jesus Christ. Paul writes: "For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake." Paul goes on to write, "But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh." (2 Cor. 4:7-11). How does the ordained ministry represent the mission of Christ? As jars of clay, as those who carry in their own bodies the death of Jesus. Ordained clergy witness to Jesus' glory by pointing away from themselves to direct our attention to the crucified and risen one.

Jared and Rebecca, that is the kind of ministry that you are being called to – not a ministry that trusts in your own competence or abilities or that is looking to advance a career or get yourself recognized. Given that you are heading to a place where the winter temperatures are 70 degrees below zero. I think you get that. This is a ministry where you are called above all to serve others, to point away from yourselves and what you can accomplish to Jesus Christ and what he has accomplished for you and for your flock. You are called to love those you serve as Jesus Christ loved you and died for you, and to lead them by teaching them what it means to become servants of the crucified Christ as well. I am confident that you are called to this ministry, and I trust that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ will provide you with the courage, humility and grace to fulfill it. What an honor it has been to share with you these words.