

Signs of Hope and Cracks in the Armor: An Ordination Sermon for a Secular Age

Preached at the Ordination of Greg and Noel Collins Pfeiffer to the Priesthood

Isaiah 6:1-8

Psalm 145

Ephesians 1:15-23

Luke 10: 1-9



One of the things I enjoy most about having been a seminary professor for awhile is that I get to go through the “entire process” with my students, from beginning to end. Nine years ago, I saw a young couple arrive at Trinity, having recently finished their undergraduate schooling in Chicago, now coming to study together – Greg and Noel Collins Pfeiffer. There are no typical seminary couples these days, but Greg and Noel were not typical even at Trinity. He was a Starbucks barista. Sometimes it seemed like his sense of style was stuck in the 90’s – the 1890’s. She sometimes worked as a swimming lifeguard. They read fantasy literature, especially Tolkien, and they hung around with a group of students who called each other “The Scooby Gang.” They lived with some other students in a kind of intentional community. Both Noel and Greg took courses from me, and while faculty are not supposed to have

favorite students, I confess that I developed an especial fondness for Greg and Noel. I had the privilege of directing Noel's thesis on Gregory of Nyssa. I saw both of them graduate in 2013. Noel's hair was the same color as her graduation hood that day. In August 2013, Noel used her secret connections to get me invited to give some talks on Reformation Anglicanism for the first CANA West Diocesan Synod in San Antonio, Texas. Among my other jobs, I am on the Commission on Ministry for the Anglican Diocese of Pittsburgh, and I was on the committee that interviewed Greg and Noel to enter the ordination process – one week before their son Elian was due to be born. And today I am privileged to preach at their ordination to the priesthood. I am honored and grateful to be part of the end of this journey, as I was at the beginning. It is, of course, a truism, to say that this is really not an end, but another beginning. But while it may be a truism, it is not trite. Noel and Greg will now be exercising the ministries that they first came to Trinity to begin studying for. Noel, Greg, I thank you for this opportunity to speak at your ordination to the priesthood. I have not taught any students of whom I am so happy to see this moment arrive as I am for you.

Greg, Noel, as I speak to you this evening, I can't help but wonder about the path you have chosen, as I am sure you probably have yourself. To take the path of ordination to the priesthood these days is to set out on a hard road. Why would anyone want to be a priest today? The culture seems to be going through what is called a process of "secularization" that began in the 1960's, but it finally seems to be reaching its apex. In the last generation, church membership in the United States has plummeted. From 1937 through the 1990s, membership regularly averaged around 70% of the population. From 1998 until now, church membership has dropped to just around 50% of the population. Since the turn of the 21st century, the percentage of Americans with no religious affiliation has doubled, from 8% to 19%. The shift is also generational. Among millennials, those of Noel's and Greg's

generation, only 42% are members of any church. And, of course, church attendance is lower than church membership. Only about a third of the population attend church weekly, but among those aged 18 to 29, only 17% attend church every week.

Along with the decrease in church membership, respect for clergy as an occupation has also dropped. A recent study found that among those who attend church regularly, 75% view clergy positively. However, among those who attend church only once a month, only 52% think clergy are trustworthy. And if you attend church less than once a month, the chances that you consider clergy to be honest and intelligent is only 27% to 30%. The population as a whole views teachers, doctors, scientists, and members of the military more positively than clergy. Only 42% of average Americans have a positive view of clergy. In terms of trustworthiness, clergy are viewed about the same level as lawyers.

So how should the church respond to this changed situation? Noel, Greg, perhaps this is a time to rethink. You already know how to make coffee and coach swimming. It's not too late to change your minds. I really don't want you to change your minds though. If anything, clergy are more needed now than they were a generation ago. There was a time when the local pastor or priest was something like those doctors who used to give house calls. Someone you could depend on, just part of the way things were, but not someone you thought about much until someone got sick. In the current situation, the priest is something more like an emergency medical technician in the midst of a major catastrophe. Clergy are more necessary now, not less. Matthew 9:36 speaks of an event in the life of Jesus: "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." When the sheep have lost their way, we need shepherds to find the sheep and bring them back into the fold. There is a passage in the gospel reading this evening that is right on target. Jesus said to them, "The harvest is

plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest." Greg and Noel, the church has called you to be laborers in the harvest.

In the rest of this sermon, I am going to make some suggestions about the ways in which clergy can minister in this new setting, but first I want to say something about how not to respond. Do not respond with fear! I think there is a very real temptation for traditional Christians to respond to the rising secularization of the culture with both anger and despair. The culture no longer supports our values, and the temptation is to retreat, to separate ourselves from the world outside and to create a kind of safe Christian ghetto. In the last few years, there has been some talk about the need for Christians to pursue what is called a *Benedict Option*, to give up on the culture as a whole and to form communities where we can pursue and practice our values together, avoiding outside interference as much as possible.

Certainly there is some truth that as Christians find themselves more and more out of touch with the current culture, they will need to take extra time and care not to allow their own identities to get swallowed up, to forget who they are. But retreating from the fray is not a Christian response. The lectionary readings give us our matching orders today. At a time when the church is surrounded by a sometimes hostile and at most indifferent culture, we are called to mission, not to retreat. The call for the church today is to hope and trust in the God who raised Jesus from the dead, not to fear. As does the apostle Paul in the Ephesians passage, we need to pray that the Father of glory may give us the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, that we might know the hope to which God has called us, and the riches of God's glorious inheritance in the saints. The church is not alone. We're backed up by the same "immeasurable power" that God used when he raised Jesus from the dead. Jesus Christ is the head of the

church; his name is the name above every name, and God the Father has put all things under his feet. Jesus is as alive today as he was 2,000 years ago. We the church are the fullness of Christ's body, who, as Paul writes, fills all in all. To quote a line from a popular movie of a generation ago, "We're on a mission from God!"

But if the church is going to be successful in our mission, we need to know the territory. In the next few minutes, I'm going to talk about two challenges that today's clergy are going to have to face, and two signs of hope. And I'm going to talk about how the traditional understanding of the office of a priest as an office of Word and sacrament addresses both the challenges and the signs of hope.

So first the challenges. The culture needs to hear the Word of God today, but they are being put off by both the messenger of the Word and by a mishearing of the message. The culture does not trust the church, and it does not trust our message.

There is one main reason that the culture does not trust the church these days – the clergy scandals of the last several decades. We constantly hear the message that it is not safe to trust your children or your wives or your sisters to be alone with Protestant pastors or Catholic priests. Of course, we might think that the "Me too" movement would have taken some of the wind out of the sails of that criticism, or at least chastened a little bit of secular self righteousness. But that hasn't happened yet. The common attitude seems to be: "Maybe Hollywood and Washington, D.C. are bad, but the church is worse."

In terms of the traditional office of Word and sacrament, the criticism is legitimate that too many of the pastors of the church have failed in properly exercising pastoral care. This is not however a legitimate criticism of ordained ministry itself. Rather, it means that those who are called to be clergy need to be reminded of what it means to be a shepherd

of the flock. So first, as the reading from Isaiah reminds us, clergy are not some kind of different species of human beings. Ordained clergy are sinners, just like those to whom they minister. Noel and Greg, the readings from Isaiah remind us that the clergy are people of unclean lips and you dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips. But One greater than a seraphim has touched our lips, and he has said, "Your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for." It is because Christ has forgiven you, that you, as a priest will be able to proclaim that Christ forgives others. But in order to do this, you yourself need to acknowledge your own sins, and you need to accept Christ's forgiveness.

Caring for the flock of which you are the shepherd means to imitate Jesus Christ by becoming a servant of his people in the same way that Jesus himself became a servant for us. In 2 Corinthians 4, the apostle Paul writes: "For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us." (vs. 5-7) What is a jar of clay? The King James translation uses the expression "earthen vessels." The whole purpose of a vessel is to be a container; the vessel does not serve as an end in itself, but to carry something else. An earthen vessel or a jar of clay is also not a golden chalice; it is something weak, even something that can be broken.

Like John the Baptist in the famous Grunewald painting, the priest points away from him or herself to the crucified Christ. It is not the priest who saves, but Jesus. The priest points to Christ, he or she does not dominate over or abuse the flock, but serves the flock. Jesus said: "[W]hoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man

came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Matt. 20:26-28) As a priest, you are called to follow the Good Shepherd, and, like him, to lay down your life for the sheep. You are called to love your people, and to be their servant.

The second challenge of the culture is that the Gospel is not heard as good news. The church has failed to preach the message in such a way that it has been heard for what it is. There are two opposite ways in which the current culture gets the gospel wrong. The first mishearing is one that was made popular a decade ago in the writings of the New Atheists, but also appears regularly on social media, film, television, and novels. For these people, the gospel is not good news, but bad news. The God of the Bible is a kind of celestial bully, who is always angry for no apparent reason, and whose only goal in life seems to be to make people miserable. At the opposite extreme is the view that has come to be called moralistic therapeutic deism. Unlike the New Atheism, this is the popular view that there is some kind of God who created the world, he wants people to be nice, the goal of life is to be happy and feel good about oneself, God keeps his distance except when we need him to fix a problem, and, finally, good people go to heaven when they die – and, of course, everyone like me is good.

The God of Christian faith is nothing like the God rejected by the New Atheists or the god affirmed by moralistic therapeutic deism. Despite their disagreement about whether there is a god, what both views have in common is the understanding that any god who was good could not possibly disapprove of the kinds of things that I do. Neither takes seriously enough the notion of either the goodness and holiness of God or the damage caused by the moral failure that is sin. The problem of evil is not that bad things happen to good people, but that even good people do really bad things that really hurt other people, and a God who is good and actually loves the world he

has created must hate the things we do that cause real damage to his creation and to other human beings.

At the same time, I think that one of the reasons that both the New Secularism and moralistic therapeutic deism seem plausible to some people is that clergy have not preached the gospel in such a way that it has actually been heard as good news. There have been preachers who preach the gospel like that now old Linda Rondstadt song – “You’re no good, you’re no good, you’re no good, Baby, you’re no good” – as if the primary message of the gospel is that human beings do nothing but sin, that God is constantly angry and would gladly send the entire human race to hell, but that fortunately Jesus loves us even if God doesn’t, so he took our punishment. I remember as a child that I liked Jesus, but I was not so sure about God the Father.

So this brings us to my next piece of advice. The call of the clergy is to preach the Word as the good news that it is – the good news of what God has done in Christ. In the “Apology for the Augsburg Confession,” Martin Luther’s disciple, Philip Melancthon suggested that we cannot love God if we do not first see God as a lovable object. The human heart cannot love a God whom it perceives as angry and threatening or giving commands of the law. God can only be loved if we first see that God is merciful, that God loves us, and is for us. Only then can we experience the gratitude that enables us to respond to God’s love with love of our own. If we understand God’s command as an expression of his love, we can respond with love in kind. The Reformed theologian Karl Barth argued that in the famous Reformation distinction of law and gospel, we need to preach the gospel before we preach the law. It is only when we first hear the gospel as the Good News that God has loved us in Jesus Christ that we can become aware of our own sinfulness and failure in contrast to the holiness and love of Christ.

The lectionary readings remind us that God’s goodness comes

first. The Psalmist writes, "The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The Lord is good to all, and his mercy is over all that he has made. . . You open your hand; you satisfy the desire of every living thing. The Lord is righteous in all his ways and kind in all his works." In Ephesians, Paul prays "that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe . . ." So Greg and Noel, I probably don't need to remind you of this, but my next piece of advice is to remember to preach the gospel as the Good News that it is – that the Good News of the gospel is that the triune God has created us out of his goodness to become bearers of the divine image so that we can share in the divine love between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and that in the depth of our sinfulness, the Father has sent his Son to take our plight on himself, in his life, death and resurrection Jesus has born the burden of our sins and delivered us from our own self-centeredness and self-destruction, and through the Holy Spirit who now dwells in us, we have been enabled to share in the resurrection life of Jesus Christ, God's Son, and that this Jesus is coming again to restore all of creation to share in God's triune love. That is good news.

Having discussed two challenges from the current secular culture, I am now going to point to two signs of hope. As I addressed the two challenges by saying something about the priest exercising the task of proclaiming the Word and exercising pastoral ministry, I am going to talk now about sacrament, and especially about the priest's indispensable role in leading the church in worship.

In the philosopher Charles Taylor's important work, *The Secular Age*, he points to two weaknesses in the secular armor: the first is found in hints of transcendence; despite the way that post-modern people live from day to day as if there is no

God, there are cracks in the armor. People still have a desire for something spiritual, they still hunger for something that consumerism and entertainment and the latest technological gadget cannot fill. We see this in interesting ways – the popularity of books like *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy and the *Harry Potter* books – and the movies based on them. Or more recently, the Marvel Cinematic universe. People care about music and art and beauty; think about how popular home improvement television shows are. People talk about living certain kinds of “life styles.” Staunch atheists spend their weekends driving their SUVs into the woods to “get in touch with nature.” None of this makes sense in a world in which there is nothing significant beyond the noses in front of our faces.

The second crack in the secular armor shows up in a kind of moral consciousness. We see this in language about being “authentic,” in concerns about the environment and global warming, about gaps between the wealthy and the poor, about the still ongoing prevalence of racism, about compassion for immigrants. Even the disagreements about sexual ethics that divide the culture point to moral concerns about those who are perceived to be excluded – thus the language of “diversity” and “inclusion.” But at the same time, there is a kind of lack of self awareness in this moral consciousness. The abandonment of the language of sin does not mean the abandonment of the language of judgment; sin has been replaced by a culture of shame. While the language of sin has a counterbalance in the language of forgiveness, repentance, and transformation, shame has no such counterbalance. Particularly missing from this new moral mix are hopes for forgiveness, and the possibility of moral transformation. It seems that those who are shamed are shamed forever.

I would suggest that the church has a way to address these two signs of hope in its worship, especially liturgical worship. And it is the task of ordained clergy to lead the church in

worship.

First, it is in the church's worship of the Triune God that the desire for transcendence, the need for something more, can be met. Human beings are desiring creatures, and we are made to worship something greater than ourselves. I never tire of repeating the prayer with which Saint Augustine opens his *Confessions*: "You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."

Unfortunately, the modern church has often done a really bad job when it comes to worship. The traditional Protestant approach has been to focus on communicating the right information when the pastor preaches the sermon. Sunday morning becomes a lecture hall, and worship is about filling the mind with the right information. In reaction to the historical Protestant approach, a more modern variety of church worship has tried to become "seeker friendly." Worship becomes a matter of entertainment, of creating worship teams that echo the style of the current secular culture. The goal here is to achieve a certain kind of emotional experience. If traditional Protestant worship focuses on communicating information to the mind, much so-called contemporary worship is addressed to cranking up the emotions.

Historic Anglican worship is liturgical, which means that it does not follow either of these approaches. Modern writers about liturgical worship suggest that worship is about living into the Christian story of the Triune God. Liturgical worship is not simply about communicating information through a sermon, nor is it about creating an emotional experience. Liturgical worship is about hearing the story over and over again, rehearsing the story, enacting the story, and learning to live it in our lives.

A helpful anecdote about the Anglican writer Richard Hooker helps to illustrate this. After the Reformation, Puritan writers complained that *The Book of Common Prayer* was too

repetitive, and the biblical readings in the lectionary were too long for the preacher to write a good sermon on them. Hooker responded that the point of the lectionary was not to provide information or to give the preacher a proof text for his sermon, but to get the worshiper so familiar with the same readings that they heard over and over again that eventually worshipers became saturated with them. The point of the language of the *Prayer Book* and the reading of the lectionary is not to provide the hearer with information or to manipulate our emotions, but to provide the worshiper with a language of prayer with which we can address God over and over until it becomes second hand.

What then is the role of the ordained priest in liturgical worship? Worship can be seen as a kind of "drama," a play in which the gathered Christian community rehearses the script over and over until acting out what we believe becomes second nature. In this play, the priest is the director, and the congregation are actors. As we practice this drama of worshiping the Triune God week after week, God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, meet us, and we are lifted out of ourselves. In the historic worship of the Church, we meet the triune God in Word and sacrament.

And this leads to the second sign of hope in modern secular culture. Post-modern people care about moral transformation, yet they don't know how to go about it. The shame culture means that we constantly judge others, and yet we don't want to be judged ourselves. Those who are shamed need forgiveness, yet shame makes forgiveness impossible. Here again, I think that the worship of the church points us in the direction of moral formation. We cannot provide forgiveness to ourselves, yet the traditional understanding of the church's worship is not that the church provides forgiveness but that it is God in Jesus Christ who is present and pronounces us forgiven when we truly repent, and the ordained minister has been given authority to speak God's forgiveness. That's why every service

has a confession and an absolution.

Moral transformation does not take place through either good advice or scolding, and certainly not through hearing sermons over and over again about how we need to change. The Reformed philosopher Jamie Smith has written a book entitled *You Are What You Love*. His point is that moral transformation takes place only when our loves change. As our lectionary reading makes clear, it is only the grace of God that can change our loves: The apostle Paul writes, "I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints . . ." and Paul prays that "the Father of glory may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you . . ." Moral transformation takes place when through faith in Christ, it is only the indwelling Spirit of wisdom who enlightens our hearts and changes our loves. I would suggest that one way in which the Spirit works this transformation of enlightenment is when, through the continual practice of meeting God in common prayer with other Christians, in rehearsing over and over the words of the Christian story, we receive the risen Christ's presence in Word and sacrament.

And this leads to my final word to Greg and Noel. Certainly it will not be your place to change people, to enable the blind in our secular culture to come to sight. Only God in Jesus Christ can do that. And yet, the history of the church is full of the testimonies of countless lost sinners who have come truthfully to sing the words "Once I was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see." It is my prayer that as ordained priests, you will be instruments through whom God brings sinners to repentance, through whom the gracious Father of Jesus Christ gives sight to the blind. The triune God will use you as his instruments when you preach the Word, when you act as shepherds and become servants of your flock through the pastoral ministry of loving and caring and visiting, when you

lead the church's gathered community in worship, when you celebrate the sacraments. Noel, Greg, as did the prophet Isaiah, you have responded today to God's call, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" "Here I am! Send me."