

SERMON FOR ORDINATION: FEAST OF IRENAEUS, BISHOP OF LYONS

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GREAT CONDUCTOR OF THE UNIVERSE , YOU PLACE THE PLANETS IN ORBIT; YOU MOLD MAJESTIC MOUNTAINS, YOU MAKE THE BIRDS SING, YOU HAVE THE HILLS SHOUT FOR JOY AND THE TREES CLAP THEIR HANDS. COULD IT BE YOU WISH TO USE US IN THE SYMPHONY YOU WANT TO PLAY? TAKE US; PLAY YOUR TRUTH UPON US, MAKE US PART OF YOUR REPERTOIR THAT THE WORLD MAY HEAR AGAIN THE LOVE SONG OF JESUS. AMEN

LET ME BEGIN BY THANKING THE BISHOP AND ORDINANDS FOR THE KIND INVITATION TO SHARE THIS VERY SPECIAL DAY WITH ALL OF YOU AS PREACHER. I AM VERY AWARE THAT IN THIS GREATER CHURCH IS A FONT OF WISDOM ABOUT THE MINISTRY OF THE PRIESTHOOD. EVERY ORDAINED PERSON LOVES TO REGALE ANYONE WHO WILL LISTEN OF THE SAGA OF THEIR MINISTRY. PLEASE REMEMBER THAT ALL OF THE ADVICE YOU HAVE AND WILL RECEIVE, INCLUDING OF COURSE, THIS SERMON, MUST BE FILTERED THROUGH YOUR EXPERIENCE WITH GOD AND THE PEOPLE WHOM YOU SERVE. THIS IS YOUR MINISTRY AS PRIEST – NOT SOMEONE ELSE’S AND, IN MY EXPERINCE, MINSTRY AS PRIEST DOES NOT HAPPEN VICARIOUSLY.

SO, HERE WE ARE: SEVEN OF YOU ABOUT TO HAVE HANDS LAID UPON YOU AND HOLY WORDS PRAYED FOR YOU, AND YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE CHURCH WILL CHANGE. PLEASE REMEMBER – ALWAYS REMEMBER - THAT YOUR FIRST ORDINATION WAS YOUR BAPTISM, AND NOW GOD AND THE COMMUNITY HAVE ASKED YOU TO TAKE ON A MORE SPECIFIC ROLE – THAT OF PRESBYTER.

ON THIS DAY OF ALL DAYS, I NEED NOT REMIND YOU OF YOUR DUTIES. YOU WILL HEAR THEM AGAIN, SHORTLY, IN THE EXAMINATION. PLEASE PAY VERY CLOSE ATTENTION TO WHAT YOU ARE PROMISING. WE ARE COUNTING ON YOU TO SAY WHAT YOU MEAN AND MEAN WHAT YOU SAY.

THE LIGHT OF CHRIST HAS ENTERED YOU IN A VERY PROFOUND WAY – A WAY THAT DEMANDS TO BE SHARED WITH OTHERS. AS WE JUST HEARD IN OUR GOSPEL LESSON, YOU ARE TO LET GOD’S LIGHT THAT IS IN YOU SHINE, SO THAT THROUGH YOU, THOSE AROUND YOU MAY BE ILLUMINATED WITH THE LIGHT OF CHRIST. LIGHT IS SUCH A WONDERFUL METAPHOR. DARKNESS MUST BE VERY PERSISTENT TO BLOCK LIGHT. I REMEMBER MANY TIMES, WHEN TRYING TO SLEEP WITH LIGHTS OFF AND SHADES DRAWN, HOW THE LITTLEST RAY OF A STREET LAMP WILL FIND ITS WAY INTO THE BEDROOM.

PERHAPS THAT WAS HOW THE CHURCH REMEMBERED IRENAEUS – AS ONE WHO THOUGHT DEEPLY ABOUT FAITH IN THE MIDST OF THE DARKNESS OF THE Gnostic HERESIES, AND KEPT RELENTLESSLY SHINING THE LIGHT OF SCRIPTURE INTO THE CHURCH. HE WAS PERSISTENT IN DEMANDING CONTINUITY OF THE APOSTLE’S TEACHING AND THE TEACHING OF BISHOPS AND CLERGY -- GENERATION AFTER GENERATION. HE OFFERED HIS INSIGHTS GENTLY AND PEACEABLY AND IN FACT, HIS NAME MEANS – “THE PEACEABLE ONE” AND SUITABLY SO. IT IS GOOD AND RIGHT TO REFLECT ON THE MINISTRY OF IRENAEUS AS YOU ARE ORDAINED IN HIS SUCCESSION.

TODAY, WE STAND ON THE THRESHOLD OF YOUR NEW MINISTRY AS PRIEST. WHAT WILL BE THE CORE VALUES OF YOUR MINISTRY? HOW WILL YOU USE THE GIFTS THAT GOD HAS GIVEN YOU AND THAT THE COMMUNITY HAS AFFIRMED? HOW WILL YOU MANAGE YOUR SCHEDULE FOR APPROPRIATE SELF CARE? HOW WILL YOU

FULFILL YOUR IMPORTANT RESPONSIBILITIES OUTSIDE OF THE CHURCH – NAMELY THOSE VOWS YOU TOOK BEFORE TODAY’S VOWS- THOSE TO YOUR LOVED ONES WHO DEPEND, IN PART, ON YOU FOR THEIR WHOLENESS AND NURTURE. YOU ARE GOING TO BE SEVERELY CHALLENGED TO SEPARATE THE URGENT FROM THE IMPORTANT IN YOUR MINISTRY. YOUR DECISIONS WILL DIRECTLY AFFECT YOUR SUCCESS IN MINISTRY AND YOUR JOY IN LIFE. HERE IS WHERE FAITHFUL WOMEN AND MEN, LIKE IRENAEUS, HAVE MUCH TO TEACH US.

THE CONTINUITY THEY CALL US TO IS A RULE OF LIFE STEEPED IN PRAYER, BIBLE STUDY AND SERVICE. THE RULES INSIST ON ADEQUATE REST AND PHYSICAL LABOR (EXERCISE) – IN OTHER WORDS WE ARE CALLED TO MODEL A BALANCE IN OUR LIVES FOR A WORLD THAT IS SEVERELY OUT OF BALANCE. HOW CAN WE EXPECT TO CARE FOR OTHERS IF WE DO NOT TAKE CARE OF OURSELVES? IT IS REALLY THE HEIGHT OF HUBRIS TO BELIEVE WE CAN BE ALL THINGS TO ALL PEOPLE IN OUR CONGREGATIONS. IT MAY SEEM LIKE THAT IS WHAT OUR CONGREGATIONS DEMAND, BUT THAT IS NOT SO. IN FACT, IN MY EXPERIENCE IT HAS BEEN QUITE THE OPPOSITE. THERE HAS ALWAYS BEEN AN ANGEL OR TWO WHO WILL REMIND ME TO OBSERVE MY DAYS OFF.

ONE OF THE OCCUPATIONAL HAZARDS OF BECOMING ORDAINED A PRIEST IN A HIERARCHICAL CHURCH IS THAT THERE IS A TEMPTATION TO “PUFF UP” OUR IMPORTANCE. IF WE ARE NOT CAREFUL AND ATTENTIVE TO OUR OWN FRAILITIES, WE MAY FIND OURSELVES BEING REMINDED OF OUR HUMANITY IN EVER SO DRAMATIC WAYS. I AM REMINDED OF THE STORY OF THE PRIEST WHO WAS CALLED TO A VERY LARGE AND SWANKY PARISH. THE COMPENSATION PACKAGE HE WAS OFFERED WAS JUST A LITTLE SOUTH OF OPULENT, SO HE IMMEDIATELY WENT OUT AND PURCHASED A NEW PORSCHE. HE WAS CONVINCED THAT HE WAS DUE THIS MATERIAL PRIZE FOR

LANDING THIS “CARDINAL” PARISH AND, AFTER ALL, IT WOULD FIT IN NICELY WITH THE OTHER CARS IN THE CHURCH PARKING LOT.

THE FIRST DAY HE HAD THE CAR, HE DECIDED HE WOULD GAS IT UP, PUT THE TOP DOWN AND DRIVE AROUND THE COUNTY LOOKING FOR PEOPLE TO PASS. OFF HE WENT, BUT, SINCE IT WAS SUNDAY AFTERNOON, THERE WERE VERY FEW CARS ON THE ROAD. AFTER DRIVING FOR A CONSIDERABLE AMOUNT OF TIME, HE SPOTTED AN OLD FARMER ON A MOTOR SCOOTER. HE DECIDED IT WASN'T MUCH, BUT HE COULD AT LEAST PASS THIS MOTORSCOOTER. HE DROPPED THE PORSCHE INTO PASSING GEAR AND ZOOMED AROUND THE FARMER, FEELING QUITE SMUG. ALL OF A SUDDEN - PUT – PUT – PUT - THE FARMER PASSED HIM. EMBARRASED, HE PASSED THE FARMER AGAIN GOING EVEN FASTER, WHEN SURE ENOUGH – PUT-PUT-PUT UP CAME THE FARMER AND AROUND THE PORSCHE HE WENT. FINALLY, THE PRIEST WAS FURIOUS, DROPPED THE PORSCHE INTO LOW GEAR AND SCREAMED AROUND THE MOTORSCOOTER, FEELING VERY SELF-SATISFIED, WHEN – PUT-PUT-PUT CAME THE FARMER. IN DISGUST, THE PRIEST PULLED TO THE SIDE OF THE ROAD JUST AS THE FARMER CAME UP BREATHLESSLY EXCLAIMING HOW GRATEFUL HE WAS THAT THE PRIEST HAD STOPPED, SINCE HIS SUSPENDERS WERE CAUGHT IN THE SIDE VIEW MIRROR! SO MUCH FOR HUBRIS!

LET ME BRIEFLY OFFER, WHAT I HAVE COME TO BELIEVE ABOUT THE VOCATION OF PRIESTHOOD. FIRST AND FOREMOST, IT IS GROUNDED IN CHRIST, YET EVER CHANGING AS THE CULTURE WE SERVE IN CHANGES. WE ARE PEOPLE WHO BELIEVE IN THE INCARNATION AND FOR US AS PRIESTS THAT MEANS WE MUST ALWAYS BE AWARE THAT WE SERVE THE PEOPLE JUST WHERE THEY ARE IN THEIR LIVES. IT CAN BE VERY MESSY AS WE ENGAGE IN ISSUES OF SEXUALITY, JUSTICE, POVERTY, RACISM AND VIOLENCE. WE HAVE PROMISED TO RESPECT THE DIGNITY OF EVERY HUMAN BEING.

THIS IS A VERY BIG IDEA AND A DIFFICULT PROMISE TO KEEP WITHOUT THE HELP OF GOD.

OUR STOCK IN TRADE IS TO SHINE THE LIGHT OF JESUS INTO EVERY SITUATION WE ENCOUNTER. ONE OF THE WAYS TO DO THAT IS TO PRACTICE RADICAL HOSPITALITY. I CAN THINK OF NOTHING MORE IMPORTANT TO THE RESTORATION OF THE VITALITY OF OUR CHURCH AND THE ACCOMPLISHMENT OF THE MISSION WE ARE CALLED TO THAN TO PRACTICE AND TEACH RADICAL HOSPITALITY.

IT IS EASY FOR US AND OUR CONGREGATIONS TO BELIEVE THAT THEY ARE HOSPITABLE. BUT RADICAL HOSPITALITY IS VERY DIFFERENT THAN BEING NICE AND POLITE. IT MEANS THROWING YOUR HEARTS WIDE OPEN TO WELCOME THE LEAST OF US. IT MEANS WELCOMING A STRANGER THE SAME WAY YOU WELCOME YOUR FRIENDS. IT MEANS CREATING A COMMUNITY WHERE NEWCOMERS CAN QUICKLY FIND A NICHE AND FEEL INCLUDED. IT MEANS ADAPTING YOUR MINISTRY PROGRAMS FOR THE WORK OF EVANGELISM.

THE DATA IS THAT WE ARE A DECLINING DENOMINATION, WITH A GRAYING POPULATION, IN A DEPRESSED ECONOMY, IN A CULTURE THAT IS CONCLUDING WE ARE IRRELEVANT. IT WILL TAKE YOUR LEADERSHIP, SKILL AND FAITHFULNESS TO OFFER THE GOOD NEWS OF CHRIST IN THIS CONTEXT. THE INSTITUTIONAL CHURCH IS UNDERGOING A SEA-CHANGE AND YOUR MINISTRY MUST NOT BE MODELED AFTER MINE OR THOSE EVEN OLDER THAN ME (OF WHICH THERE ARE VERY FEW IN ATTENDANCE TODAY)

WHAT YOU THINK YOUR MINISTRY WILL BE – IT MAY NOT BE. YOU WILL MAKE VOCATIONAL PLANS AND THEN YOU WILL ENCOUNTER LIFE AND REALITIES THAT MAKE YOUR PLANS IMPOSSIBLE. YOU MAY POUR YOUR HEART INTO A CHURCH

COMMUNITY, AND THEN FEEL GOD'S TUG TO MOVE TO ANOTHER PART OF THE VINEYARD. PLEASE REMAIN OPEN TO THE SPIRIT. YOUR CONTROL IS AN ILLUSION -- PREDICTABILITY IS AN ILLUSION. PLANS ARE DREAMS, NOT REALITY. WE ARE INVITED TO TRUST IN THE LORD'S CALL FOR US, AND IT SHALL WORK ITS WAY OUT IN WONDROUS AND MYSTERIOUS WAYS. THE VOCATION OF PRIESTHOOD MAY BE DESCRIBED AS A NEVER-ENDING SERIES OF HOLY INTERRUPTIONS. MOST OF THE INTERRUPTIONS ARE FILLED WITH JOY AND PROMISE. WHEN YOU HOLD A BABY IN YOUR ARMS IN BAPTISM, YOU WILL SEE GOD. WHEN YOU SIT AT BEDSIDE OF ONE ON THE HEAVENWARD WAY, YOU WILL KNOW THE POWER OF THE SPIRIT. WHEN YOU FILL A BOWL OF SOUP OR HAMMER SOME NEW SIDING ON A MISSION TRIP, YOU WILL KNOW THE PRESENCE OF CHRIST AND YOU WILL LOOK BACK ON THIS DAY AND SMILE.

LESLIE, ALTON, SALLIE, PHILLIP, DAVID, JOSEPH AND STEVEN: I CHARGE YOU TO PREACH THE TRUTH OF CHRIST'S LOVE FOR ALL OF US AS IT HAS BEEN REVEALED IN SCRIPTURE, IN YOUR LIFE AND IN THE LIVES OF THOSE WHO HAVE WITNESSED TO GOD'S LOVE BEFORE US. WE CANNOT REACH PEOPLE'S HEARTS WHILE IGNORING THEIR MINDS. THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION OF THE PEOPLE UNDER YOUR CARE IS A HIGH CALLING, PRECISELY BECAUSE WE, AS A CHURCH, HAVE NOT DONE A VERY GOOD JOB WITH THE PAST GENERATION. YOU WILL BE REMEDIAL TEACHERS, AS WAS JESUS; BUT YOU ARE ALSO A LIFELONG LEARNER, AS WE -- CLERGY AND LAY - GROW TOGETHER IN RIGHTEOUSNESS.

I CHARGE YOU TO ENCOURAGE YOUR PEOPLE TO A LIFE OF WHOLENESS AND HOLINESS. FIND SPIRITUAL PRACTICES THAT WORK FOR YOU, STICK TO THEM, AND COMMEND THEM TO THOSE IN YOUR CARE. IT IS ONLY THROUGH SPIRITUAL PRACTICE AND ADOPTING A RULE OF LIFE THAT OUR LIVES -- AND OUR WORLD -- CAN BE TRANSFORMED.

I CHARGE YOU TO PRAY FOR US. NOT ONLY AS INTERCESSORS, BUT ALSO AS BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN CHRIST. THROUGH PRAYER, HELP US OPEN OURSELVES TO EXPERIENCE GOD'S JOY AND COMFORT IN OUR LIVES. TELL US, TIME AND TIME AGAIN, OF THE POWER AND EFFICACY OF PRAYER.

FINALLY, IN THE WORDS OF THE GREAT HYMN, I CHARGE YOU ALL TO TELL US THE OLD, OLD STORY OF JESUS AND HIS GLORY - OF JESUS AND HIS LOVE. TELL US THE BIBLE STORIES, NOT AS A RELIC FROM THE ANCIENT PAST, BUT AS OUR LIVING, SACRED HISTORY. TEACH AND PREACH TO US WITH INTEGRITY FOR GOD'S HOLY WORD AND WITH THE RIGORS OF SCHOLARSHIP, SO THAT OUR MINDS MAY BE CHALLENGED AND OUR PASSION FOR THE GOSPEL INFLAMED. HELP US TO AVOID INTELLECTUAL LOCK-UP OVER FACTS AND SITUATIONS WE CANNOT IMMEDIATELY UNDERSTAND. YOU WILL DO THIS WHEN YOU HOLD BEFORE US THE MYSTERY OF GOD -- A GOD SO VAST AND HOLY THAT OUR MINDS CAN NEVER FULLY ENCOMPASS GOD'S TRANSCENDENCE.

I CHARGE YOU TO LOVE US. LOVE US EVEN WHEN WE ARE TOUGH TO LOVE. ST. PAUL REMINDS US, IN HIS FIRST LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS, THAT ALL THE GIFTS WE POSSESS, ALL THE POWER WE HAVE, ALL OF THE SACRIFICES WE MAKE, COME TO NOTHING IF WE DO NOT LOVE GOD AND OUR NEIGHBOR.

YOUR GIFTS AS A PASTOR, PREACHER AND TEACHER WILL SOON BE KNOWN TO YOUR CONGREGATIONS. BUT TO EFFECTIVELY LOVE THOSE AROUND YOU, YOU MUST LOVE YOURSELF ENOUGH TO TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF. SO MY FINAL CHARGE IS TO TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF AND THOSE WHOM YOU LOVE. THEY EXPECT YOU TO BE DEVOTED TO THEM. ALWAYS RESERVE TIME FOR THE THINGS THAT BRING YOU JOY -- FOR JOY IS A CRITICAL PART OF YOUR JOURNEY WITH CHRIST.

STEVEN, LESLIE, ALTON, PHILLIP, SALLIE, DAVID AND JOSEPH: MAY GOD
RICHLY BLESS YOUR ORDAINED MINISTRY, MAY THE BODY AND BLOOD OF JESUS
PROTECT YOU AND EVER REMIND YOU OF HIS LOVE FOR YOU; MAY THE HOLY SPIRIT
EMPOWER YOU FOR MINISTRY AMONG US.

AMEN