

The Right Rev. Robert C. Wright
Sermon for the Ordination of Priests

June 20, 2015 | The Cathedral of St. Philip, Atlanta

Isaiah 6:1-8, Psalm 132: 8-19, Philippians 4:4-9, John 10:11-18

Good afternoon! Today we gather to worship God in a particular way. Praising God with our lips and our lives. By publicly acknowledging that which God has been working on for many years, through the church, in the lives of: Kemper, Nancee, Alan, Bryan, Richmond, Ashley, Austin, Rich, Will and Bonnie. We have come to ordain the ten of you to follow Jesus the layperson. So let us begin at the beginning. With God.

That's where Isaiah began. Sitting in worship. The world outside in vertigo-inducing transition. King Uzziah is dead, now what? Maybe in that moment Isaiah was ready to see what always had been. That God was high and lifted up. That in the silence there is a dynamism. That Holy, Holy, Holy is the best song the church will ever sing. And if all we do in the name of Jesus is to help people see that God is unique in being, peerless in perfection, and genius in reconciliation—in a word, holy—and worth living and dying for. If that happens to us and through us, then maybe we can be called faithful.

In that holy moment. In this holy moment. When holiness comes near, we notice ourselves and others in a new way. Isaiah tells the ages, "I am a man of unclean lips and I live among the unclean." I like that statement from Isaiah. His confession of complicity with the world. His confession of complicity with the status quo of the temple. We clergy rarely talk like that. Isaiah understands that he's in the temple and the temple is in a particular political jurisdiction, and a particular region of the world. And some stuff, not of God, has found its way into him, his peers and the temple.

Because of this glimpse of the holy, he may understand for the first time that he is what is wrong with the church and the world. At least in part. On days like today, it's possible to get really moist in the eyes about how God is sending a group of beautiful innocents into the world on an impossible mission armed only with prayer, good intentions and polyester garments. Among wolves and into the thick fog bank of racial hatred, gun violence and paralyzing fear. Into an ocean of data about decline and the uselessness of the church.

But what might be a more useful paradigm to adopt today is that all of us are what is wrong with the church. And that the work of each of us is to reflect on our complicity with the status quo and to amend ourselves, our souls and bodies as the supreme act of worship. Making disciples by making ourselves a disciple first. Transforming ourselves by the gift of the Holy Spirit into an acceptable sacrifice which is our reasonable worship. This is what the psalmist had in mind when he urged us: Get right with God, all you who call yourselves ministers, and then the congregation can sing with joy.

Rejoice in the Lord Always

And what about this joy. Paul has something to say about that. Call it a text message. Not LOL or OMG but R-I-T-L-A. RITLA. Rejoice in the Lord Always. What gave Paul so much joy, and why should we care? Paul discovered something in his travels, his studies and in his service to people. Paul discovered that God was very near! Paul discovered wherever he found himself, on good or bad days, God was near. Paul discovered that God was near whether there was money or scarcely any. Paul discovered that even when he felt alone, bullied or abandoned God was near. Paul realized this good news on one of his worst days. And ever since that day, Paul told everyone he could about his discovery. Paul didn't say be happy. He said rejoice in the Lord. Like the words of Morning Prayer: "We bless you for our creation, preservation and all the blessings of this life." Joy like the words from the collect today: "Let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new."

Joy is better than happiness. Happy tends to fade as soon as the happenings stop happening! You have to pursue happiness. But joy – joy chases after you. Paul said rejoice twice in the same sentence, which is joy supersized. Epic joy! In God Paul found a trustworthiness so wonderful that he devoted his whole life to writing and commending it. That God is trustworthy. That God is real, able, good and generous. And we know this chiefly by the birth, life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That's what Paul found out one day long ago and that's why he sent his text message RITLA down through the ages.

But not only that. As Paul told his friends in Philippi, the companion of joy is peace. Peace that passes understanding. You ten go forward from this ordination service with the authority conferred to you by the church. You are entering into an authority-for-service covenant. We expect that you will do your level best to be the words you promise today. And we pledge to pray for you, support you, teach you, learn from you and love you. But we can't confer God's peace on you. You will have to come to that on your own. We can point to it. We can model it for you. But it is yours to discover. And that's the good news.

One thing about this peace that passes all understanding: you won't know you have it for certain until the waters of ministry and life get really rough. The peace that Paul is talking about is not placid water peace. It's not a quiet morning at the lake or the beach thing. This peace is an anchor when all around you is raging. It only surfaces in the storm. It's the peace we are praying for in Charleston, South Carolina, right now. Peace that is a surprising refuge in despair and a blessed rebuff of evil. Peace that is a purging oneness with the author of life and that accompanies faithful obedience. Paul's peace, our peace, is not the performance of being a non-anxious presence. The only way to be truly non-anxious is to be fastened to the one who is and was and is among us now. The only real peace that there is for us is John the Baptist's peace: We must decrease so that Christ may increase.

Live the Great Commission

Now comes the best part: Jesus. “I am the good shepherd,” Jesus said. And of course at these words, our minds and imaginations go to countless stained glass windows of a very Scandinavian looking Jesus with a little lamb over his shoulder. Or the other representations where Jesus looks more like one of the Bee Gees than a swarthy carpenter prophet. But I can never hear those words or even see those windows without thinking about the story Jesus told about leaving the 99 good and faithful sheep to pursue the one sheep lost and alone. For me that’s the image of the good shepherd. That image is about goodness and mercy pursuing lost ones. That image is about the 99 being mature enough to care for one another while the necessary work of spiritual search and rescue continues.

This is the work of the Great Commission that each of us is entrusted to embody and mobilize. But I have to tell you, I am not sure we still believe in the Great Commission anymore. I know we are supposed to preach it, but do we live it out? As one person said to me recently, “Everyone who should be an Episcopalian is already Episcopalian.” Evangelism has become a four-letter word in the church. Evangelism seems more like a great omission in many places rather than a commission. And yet people say to me, “Bishop we have no idea why our congregation is shrinking.” We forget that Jesus never said, “Wait and welcome.” Jesus said, “Go and make.”

Jesus dreamed of a world where his friends overflowing with the good news of love and redemption would be winsome with people. He dreamed that our authenticity would give us facility with people. He dreamed that having studied at his feet we would know how to listen to the longing beneath people’s words and offer just the right word or silence. Jesus’ ministry was venturesome, not closed or clichéd. To love as Jesus loved is to reserve the best part of your allegiance for the people beyond the reach of the church. Was this easy for the disciples? No! Were the disciples all extraverts? Probably not. But maybe there is no higher form of worship than for an introvert to submit their introversion to the Great Commission.

The Holy Spirit never apologizes for evolving us past our comfort zones. Listen to the words from the Church of England’s Ordination Service: “With your Bishop and fellow ministers, you are to proclaim the word of the Lord and to watch for the signs of God’s new creation. You are to be messengers, watchmen and stewards of the Lord; you are to teach and to admonish, to feed and provide for God’s family, to search for his children in the wilderness of this world’s temptations, and to guide them through its confusions, that they may be saved through Christ forever.” That is the work. If you cannot pledge yourself to this work, it would be better to forego ordination all together. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. Jesus said, “But I am the good shepherd. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.”

Our friend Barbara Brown Taylor tells a story about a huge sea turtle she ran across once. Having laid her eggs on the beach at night, the turtle became disoriented because of all the electric lights. Instead of heading back out to sea, her disorientation had taken her further

inland and into the dunes. By the time morning came the turtle was lost in the dunes, exhausted and baking in the morning sun. Barbara found a park ranger and he brought his jeep with him. He flipped her on her massive shell and strapped tire chains around her front legs, and hooked the chains to a trailer hitch on his jeep. Over the dunes back to the ocean's edge, he unhooked her and turned her right side up. After some time the waves gently welcomed her back home and slowly she was saved. And then Barbara says this, "It's sometimes hard to tell whether you are being killed or saved by the hands that turn your life upside down."

Kemper, Nancee, Alan, Bryan, Richmond, Ashley, Austin, Rich, Will and Bonnie, in just minutes I and your brothers and sisters will lay our hands on you and ask God to make you a priest of the church. And at least I pray that our hands on you will turn your lives upside down to the glory of God until you are made right side up by Almighty God.

"Lord, you give the great commission: Heal the sick and preach the word. Lest the Church neglect its mission and the Gospel go unheard, help us witness to your purpose with renewed integrity; with the Spirit's gifts empower us for the work of ministry."

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