

A SERMON FROM ST. MARK'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

NEW CANAAN, CONNECTICUT

THE AWFUL ROWING TOWARD GOD

AN ORDINATION SERMON FOR JOSH HILL

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January 31, 2013 ~ Ordination of Joshua Ashton Hill to the Diaconate

Luke 22:24-27

Josh, Hannah, Elana, and Maya: We love you and we have missed you. Thank you for returning to St Mark's for Josh's ordination tonight.

Because the deacon is the icon of servant ministry, I would like to talk with you about the servant nature of all ordained ministry. Even though Josh will be a deacon only briefly, he won't cast off his servant identity when he is ordained priest. He'll take it with him. And so what happens to him tonight marks him forever.

By the servant posture of ordained ministry I do not mean the ingratiating, pious, humble-pie minister of popular imagination, who by his bowing and scraping attracts to himself more attention than less. I do not mean the deacon or priest who is so reluctant to think for himself or herself and to take a risk that he ends up passing the buck in the name of respect for the system. Nor do I mean the cleric who needs so badly to be liked that she will extinguish himself to keep in the good graces of others. This is not servanthood. This is slavery. It refuses to use the spirit of power and love that God gives us by the Holy Spirit and instead works out of the spirit of fear. It gives God no glory and does the church no good.

It's strange that we have come to think of servant ministry in this way, especially since

good servants are rarely like that. Remember the movie "Gosford Park"? The servants in that movie are a whole underground world of efficiency. They are dressed for action and they have their lamps lit. They work in a crazy and decadent household, but they know what their masters want, they know what their jobs are, and they do them. You wouldn't call their lives "fulfilling" in the conventional sense, but ontologically they are right on target. Because they know that their job is to be other-directed people. They know that it's not about them.

It is a great gift to know, as an ordained person, that it's not about you. Since we make such a great drama over the call to ministry, the discernment process, the seminary experience, and the ordination service itself, you would think it was about you. Of course, Josh, we honor you and your gifts tonight. But as a deacon and then as a priest, you must learn how to be other-directed, just as God is. There is no other way to do the job, and you learn how to do it on the job. ***Don't be afraid to be a beginner.***

A newly ordained priest who was doing very well in his first position once asked me, "How do I know if I'm doing a good job? How do I know if I'm a good priest?" The answer to

that is that a good priest is a priest who is in a love relationship with the people he or she serves. Intelligence, zeal, experience, good grades – all these help. But the ordained ministry is not about the deployment of your gifts. It is not about you bringing the people you serve from one place to another by virtue of what you know and they don't. It's about a community in which the people of God can enlarge their hearts and grow into the stature of Christ. That's the greatest drama there is. And so to be a good priest, you have to like people – and not just in the abstract, but in their specific manifestations. Don't get cynical about people. I will never forget what I read once in a novel by the Australian writer Thomas Keneally. The characters were talking about a priest and one person said, "Oh yes, him. He loves no one, so he imagines he loves God."

The people you will serve – both adults and children - are amazing vessels of grace and wisdom and surprise. They will also be, sometimes, as Moses said, mysterious and recalcitrant, their lives filled with griefs and fears and desires and dreams that they may never share with anyone else, and sometimes not with you. They live in a crazy and decadent world. They will sometimes be, thankfully, impervious to your intelligence and charm. Your job is to love them as they are while pastoring them into who they are meant to be in Christ, people of large and loving hearts who can be a blessing to the world. Your job is to feed the tradition to the people of God so they grow in love of God. St. Augustine taught us that we are hardwired to want God and that nothing less will satisfy us. Don't give people anything less than that. That's the service the Master requires of you. And remember, people don't have to love you for you to love them. ***Don't be afraid to love your people, no matter what.***

Your best training for being an other-directed person comes when you take the ordination vows tonight. Note carefully that so much of

the service talks about standing within and under the authority of the Bishop, the Bible, the doctrine, discipline, and worship of the Episcopal Church. Tonight you will vow to be loyal and obedient. To believe what you have been taught, to model your life on Holy Scripture, to conform to what is expected of you. You will become an institutional leader under the authority of Bishop Douglas and Bishop Young. Our culture is so in love with the "let us explore the marvel that is moi" attitude that we have forgotten what great freedom this obedience and this conformity confer on ordained ministers. Once you live within the great truths and disciplines of the Church, you don't have to worry about inventing your own. The Church has plenty of room for innovation and vigorous dissent, but lone rangers only pull us down and distract us from the privilege of serving the people in our care. The collar will make you self-conscious at first, but soon it will make you feel anonymous, invisible. The collar attracts attention, always. But it confers a kind of interior invisibility. This is a grace. Use your anonymity to glorify the people of our Church and the Lord you serve. Ordination is not about privilege or status. It's about responsibility. When you put on your collar in the morning, you might pray, "May I decrease, Lord, that You may increase." ***Don't be afraid to be invisible.***

And don't forget God. Don't get so caught up in being a good preacher and growing your ministry and making an impact that you forget the One whose service you enter tonight. There are plenty of clergy who live with God as if they are in a bad marriage with God, their spiritual lives filled with triviality and absence and dishonesty and self-importance. Don't forget that you are a Christian as well as an ordained person. Pray to God that you will always struggle. And remember, you can't give what you don't have. As a body, a community of faith cannot go spiritually beyond where its leader has gone. Beware of abusing your natural charm to cast a spell on the people

you serve; it will paralyze them and you. Inasmuch as you are able, lead the way in struggle, in prayer, in transformation, in what the poet Anne Sexton called “the awful rowing toward God.” ***Don’t be afraid to serve the struggle.***

Remember also your weakness and insufficiency. It will always be with you in this hard work. That’s why St Paul says that we have this ministry by the mercy of God, not by our own merits. It is only by God’s mercy that we attempt to serve. This and this alone will make you a person of courage. ***Don’t be afraid to lean on God’s mercy.***

Before we know it, we’re going to be in Holy Week, and we will remember once again that Jesus himself was our servant. Jesus, the One who was perfectly other-directed. The One who lived within the perfect authority of His Father and who in love brought his sisters and brothers into the very heart of God. The One who loved his people perfectly, no matter what. The One who was in perfect communion with his Father in prayer. The One whose entire life was struggle and transformation in the perfect meeting of God and humanity. Josh, do not forget that before he left this world because we would not accept his servanthood, he knelt at the feet of his friends and he served them one last time. He dirtied his hands with the grime and sweat and tears of this life, the great unreconciled pain of human history, and he handed those things to his Father. And so his courage and love redeemed the world.

Be like Jesus. He never forgot that

The Lord said to Abraham: Do not be afraid.

The Lord said to Isaac: Do not be afraid.

Moses said to the people: Do not be afraid.

Joshua said to the people: Do not be afraid.

Boaz said to Ruth: Do not be afraid.

Jonathan said to David: Do not be afraid.

The Lord said to Jeremiah: Do not be afraid.

The angel said to Mary: Do not be afraid.

The angel said to Joseph: Do not be afraid.

The angel said to the shepherds: Do not be afraid.

The angel said to the women at the tomb: Do not be afraid.

The Lord said to Paul: Do not be afraid.

And Jesus says to us: Do not be afraid, I am with you always.

Josh, we love you. Do not be afraid. Our Lord is with you always.

Amen.