

KEEP YOUR MINISTRY WELL OILED

A Message for an ordination service by Rev. Bill Banuchi

I'm deeply honored and humbled to be asked to deliver the Word at this occasion of the recognition of God's hand upon these servants who have been called to what we have come to know as the ordained ministry.

I have sought the heart and mind of God for a meaningful word that these whose ordination by God is about to be recognized by man could carry with them through the years of labor in the particular field of harvest to which they have been assigned, a word that they can use as a guide to help them stay on that path ordained by God, without falling to Satan's devices intended to distract them, and to entice them into exploring another way, a way that may seem right to human reason, but in the end, would lead them away from that destiny that God has purposed. And so I thought of the need to maintain a ministry that would operate always as a well-oiled machine that would continue through the years to fulfill their commission.

We know from the Scriptures that oil is always representative of the Holy Spirit, so in a sense, we know we must keep a fresh anointing of His Spirit operating continually in and through our hearts, our minds and even the members of our body. We must stay in the flow of the living waters springing up from our innermost being, the very essence of the Holy Ghost filling us continually.

And three of the manifestations of the continual filling of His Spirit can be seen in the acronym for the word, oil: Obedience, Integrity and Love.

And so my message to these warriors to be ordained today is to be sure you keep your ministry well oiled with obedience, integrity and love.

Let's look at obedience.

"But Samuel replied: 'Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams.'" --1 Samuel 15:22

We are called to obedience to the Word and will of God as He gives us revelation to discern it. And yes, this is always an act of faith. We live by faith, and so we cannot claim to know God's will with certainty, for now we see as dimly in a mirror. We know only in part. Only when we are in His presence will we know fully. And to claim to know the absolute mind of Christ is to neglect Paul's warning to:

"Be careful when you think you stand lest you fall", (1 Corinthians 10:12.)

So we try to maximize the probability that we are hearing from God, by studying His Word diligently, by soaking our concerns in deep fervent prayer, and by seeking counsel from those whom God has placed over us, and then we step out in faith, certainly hoping to see signs of confirmation and validation, and a fruitful harvest. But what happens when we don't see those signs of confirmation? Do we waiver? Do we doubt? Do we give in to our natural senses?

Surely, it's only reasonable and prudent to review our decisions, to make sober judgment –as Paul put it- to see if we really heard the voice of the Spirit. But after having sought the Lord on the issue, do we continue to stand with sanctified stubbornness, which is perseverance defined, or do we try another route, perhaps one that looks more promising by our human measures?

Must we see the results anticipated or are we willing to sow seed trusting God for the harvest?

"So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. ⁸ The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor. ⁹ For we are God's co-workers." -1 Corinthians. 3:6-9

It is easy to obey when that obedience seems reasonable and pleasing to our own understanding and desires, and particularly when it's found pleasing to those around us. But will we waiver when we don't see the results anticipated, though we still believe this is God's will?

There's a story about John Quincy Adams when he served in Congress after having served as President, (How's that for humility). Every year during his congressional term in the 1830s he would submit a bill outlining a three-point plan to abolish slavery, even though he knew there was absolutely no chance of this bill ever passing through the House given the current political attitudes concerning slavery. But he was persistent. In fact, he was so persistent in this quest that the House of Representatives actually passed a Gag Rule to stop him from submitting this seemingly pointless bill every year. One magazine interviewer asked Him, why he would introduce this same bill every year when he knew it wasn't going anywhere. His response to that reporter is a sentiment I have tried to adopt for my own life, and one that I have found great comfort in in times of doubt, and I would strongly recommend to these ordinands. John Quincy Adams, former President, and now Congressman told that reporter,

"Duty is mine; results are God's"

Ministry is a call to abide in Him, discern His will and step out in obedient faith knowing that duty is ours; results are God's."

By the way, while Adams was persistently submitting his petitions to abolish slavery, he befriended a young one term congressman who 30 years later would become President of the United States and would, in effect, put Adams's plan into law. His Name was Abraham Lincoln; His work: the Emancipation Proclamation.

God's Word truly does not return void. God is a good steward of his human resources. No work done in His name is without effect for His Kingdom.

Obedience is ours; results are God's.

Ministry is a call to integrity. David tells us in Psalm 41:12, "In my integrity He upholds me."

It is a call to understanding wholeness and integrity as being all together, spirit, mind and body. When I am doing physically what I know intellectually is the right thing to do, and my spirit sounds the Amen, then I have peace. And where peace is, the Prince of Peace reigns.

I must be as certain as I can be that I am living open-hearted before God as an individual, that there is personal communion with the One who is everything to me. The scariest passage to me as a preacher, in the Bible is Matthew 7:22 and 23:

"Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' ²³Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers.'"

What Jesus was saying to his disciples was that they did not have that close intimate personal relationship where they could know his thoughts in their minds and feel His heart beating in their chests. They were doing their own thing in Jesus' Name, while missing Jesus himself.

That's why we must not just study Christ, but we must abide in Him and let Him abide in us by His Spirit. We must always be honest with God about our proclivity to sin, knowing that His grace is greater, as long as our hearts are turned toward Him, and we're not making excuses, or justifying ourselves.

Think of a series of concentric circles. The innermost circle represents the individual personal integrity with God. The next circle is the marriage. After our integrity with Christ personally, we must turn to establish integrity in our marriage.

Integrity is a call to minister to our spouse, as our first church. *For just as a chain is only as strong as its weakest link so also is our faith only as strong as your weakest relationship*, and if that weakest relationship is with your spouse, then know that it is right there where God is looking to advance His Kingdom.

Then, when there is integrity in the marriage, that institution that God has called holy, then the two of you can put ten thousand to flight, raising godly offspring and establishing an atmosphere of righteousness, peace and joy in your homes which is the very manifestation of Kingdom of God.

The next area of integrity is in our relationship with the Church, the family of God, in general, and in particular that congregation that He has entrusted to our care. And this perhaps can be the most challenging. It requires an understanding of our own anointing and gifting.

For Jesus, himself, was the only one sufficiently gifted to fulfill the roles of prophet, apostle, evangelist, pastor and teacher fully, and look how he ended up! The rest of us struggle with our own human limitations.

It requires making sober assessment of our gifting, and pursuing that for which we have been gifted and anointed. Nothing more, nothing less.

But whether we are pastoring a congregation, or preaching itinerantly, or heading up a para-church ministry, our intention must always be to serve others in the name of Christ, and not to use others for the cause of Christ.

That is a fine line that is too easily crossed, and has shipwrecked the faith of many despite the best of intentions.

We must always be careful not to use people to build His Church, but to serve people as He builds His Church among us.

And in all these things, we must be the same person behind the pulpit, as we are when we are at home with the family, and when we are alone in the study. This is what characterizes a man or a woman of integrity.

And thirdly is a call to love:

Luke 6: 32¹¹ If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' love those who love them. ³³And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' do that. ³⁴And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' lend to 'sinners,' expecting to be repaid in full. ³⁵But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. ³⁶Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

Any minister who is diligently pursuing the favor of God will at some point come to be challenged by this verse in ways that will drive him or her to their knees in complete brokenness.

I remember riding into town for our first pastoral assignment as a young United Methodist pastor. When I arrived there was already a couple waiting to be married by the new minister coming to town. They were a middle-aged couple, and I had the great privilege of leading them both to Christ in the course of our pre-marital counseling. They were saved, married and became a vital part of the church family. However, just two years later, they led a campaign for

my dismissal. I was hurt. Then a few years later I learned that the husband had become a United Methodist minister. Now I was angry. I had to repent from my heart. It wasn't easy, but the day eventually came that I found myself preaching in his church truly glad for the work that God had done in this man's life, and grateful to God that I had a small part to play.

The call to love is not always easy, but it always results in His peace, and that is priceless.

When we're hurt, or abused, or we don't get the recognition we think we deserve, it's important for us to remember what C.S. Lewis told us:

"There is nothing better than a Christian who knows himself, and no Christian who knows himself would dare think he deserves anything better than hell."

So then every morning when I awake to discover that I am not burning in Hell I can begin my day with a spirit of rejoicing that flows from a heart of gratitude because God has not dealt with me fairly, but by His grace that has granted me eternal life, and it is that life that I yearn to see flow through me into the very lives of others.

So then, this ordination service serves as marker, as did the memorial stones the Israelites placed on the banks of the Jordan to mark where God has worked his wonders by cutting off the flow of the Jordan River. This ordination service marks the place where these have crossed over to pursue the plans and purposes of God in the particular harvest field assigned to them by the Master.

Let their work always be characterized by obedience, integrity and love, as a well-oiled machine continually advancing the Kingdom of God until the coming of the King!