

“A Call to Humble Inspired Service”  
The Reverend Michael L. Delk  
Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia  
The Ordination of Bob Gay to the Sacred Order of Deacons – 24 April 2010  
Jeremiah 1:4-9; Psalm 84; II Corinthians 4:1-6; Luke 22:24-27

It has been a while since Bob Gay was a boy, but I would be surprised if Bob doesn't identify at least a little with the poor prophet Jeremiah, a man summoned by God at a tender age to speak the truth to a people who had forsaken it. Jeremiah, understandably, was reluctant, and tried using his immaturity as an excuse to avoid the unpleasant and hazardous task of telling people a truth they were not eager to hear. Now Bob has been faithful to God's call through prayerful discernment and diligent study and patient waiting, but I imagine that somewhere under that calm, composed demeanor, there are fibers of his being vibrating at a high pitch, wondering, "What have I gotten myself into?"

Those fibers will continue to vibrate, well after Bishop Hollerith invokes the Holy Spirit to make Bob a deacon. For like Jeremiah, whatever our age, whatever order or office in the Church we hold, no matter how well prepared, no matter how many years have passed since first noticing a sense of call, anyone who is both wise and honest will admit that none of us ever feels ready to accept the challenges and opportunities that come our way when we accept the summons to serve. And this is precisely the way God means for it to be.

Otherwise, we might get some nasty notions in our heads about how our brilliance, our inner drive, our life experiences have put us in a position to conquer the world for Christ, when in fact Jesus came to conquer evil, not the world. The world he came to save, which he did, sparing us a great deal of embarrassing futility. If you feel overwhelmed by your ministry, good; it is overwhelming, for only by grace are we empowered to overcome, to transcend, and to share in the victory of Christ.

This childlike humility and dependence, so distinct from the childish delusions of grandeur and independence that seduce some, will prove a useful source of perspective in ministry. Reality has a tendency to laugh at our plans, demanding flexibility, adaptability, and a healthy sense of humor. As a colleague once put it, the life of ministry is like jazz: there's a basic framework, but it's the improvisation that makes it special and worth listening to.

Like Dizzy Gillespie on a raging trumpet riff, you're in for a wild ride, Bob. As a deacon-to-be, God has called you into a world that has little if any conceptual capacity for the role you play. To some in the Church, you will be an unwelcome nuisance; to others, an enigma; still more may foist upon you expectations alien to your office. To many in the broader community, you may appear a perplexing if mostly harmless anachronism, though some will see you as the angel of mercy God has sent you to be.

The vows you take in a few moments compel you to love all of them: kind and mean; fat and lean; street smart, book smart, and those who fervently believe that ignorance is bliss. Your love for people will take many forms, but probably none will prove more touching or difficult than simply telling the truth.

It can be tough to do, but it's the only thing that sets people free. The forces of evil rely on deceit, but we have a story to tell. Jeremiah once was tempted to "not mention [God], or speak any more in his name," but should you ever seek to temper or tamper with the word of God for the sake of convenience or comfort, you will find as Jeremiah did, "something like a burning fire, shut up in [your] bones." [20:9] The truth will eat you alive if you don't set it free, and by telling the truth you make people free by giving them a choice that really matters: between hope and despair, community and isolation, generosity or poverty of spirit; a choice between life and death.

It will take true humility, anchored deep in dependence on God's grace, for you to stand up with courage for the truth and kneel down with compassion to reach those prostrate at the very bottom of life, especially when the situation requires you to do both at the same time. To know that humility of absolute dependence upon God is to know the truth that sets free, and once free in the Spirit, watch out world, because as Jesus said in the Gospel of John, "the wind blows where it chooses," and if you hoist up your sails, the holy breath of creation will pitch up a gale to ride.

But don't worry about the rocks and the waves. They toss us about on the adventure of ministry, but the Psalmist sang, we need not fear "For the Lord God is both sun and shield; he will give grace and glory." There is great blessing in the call to serve. As we love others selflessly as Christ loves us, we discover our true identity, as creatures created in the image of God. Whatever sacrifice we make comes not as loss, but for a making holy, a setting apart that yields greater grace than could ever be hoped for had we held on to it instead. Not that we sacrifice ourselves in vain for personal gain, but we trust in the goodness of God to honor our offering and sustain us with strength, just as seed cast into the ground sprout up with abundance.

One of the most awe-inspiring gifts of serving the people of God is the ever-increasing awareness of Christ in your midst through the Body and the individual members of it. This can also be terribly distressing, because seeing the light of Christ shine forth from the people God has called you to serve can make a person feel even more unready to exercise ministry. But that's the miracle of servant ministry. It is cyclical, not linear, the only perpetual motion machine in the universe. All you need to do, Bob, is allow it to happen, and what you will soon realize is that your ministry is fed by your ministry, because the people God has sent you to lift up have also been sent by God to lift others up, including you.

There are so many, so many, who accept that summons and exercise ministry in a variety of ways beyond counting. Your job, Bob, is to open us up to fresh possibilities, to encourage us when the risk seems high, to remind us of the promise we share, to shore us up with scripture and help us find through prayer the grace to endure. Stay out of our way, Bob, but help coordinate our efforts. Some days you may feel like an air traffic controller dealing with planes that have turned their transponders off and their radios tuned to the wrong frequency. Sorry about that. Do your best to keep us from crashing into each other in a frenzy of ministry, but when we do, be a healing presence to the injured, and grieve with those who mourn.

But most important of all, as a deacon, we need you to help us see, not only each other in all our mutual beauty, but those whom we might prefer to ignore and forget, who are no less precious in God's sight. As a deacon of the Church, you will be granted official license to be a royal pain in the posterior, and I expect you to inflict the pangs of conscience with merciful yet relentless zeal. Preach like your life depends on it, because somebody's does, and in Christ, your life is connected to every other life inextricably. Preach with your life. Preach the forgiveness of God which knows no fathom, and witness souls blaze with joy.

It is customary at ordinations to give a charge, and I have given significant thought to what that ought to be. But frankly, Bob, you're pretty charged up already, and if this sermon and the examination and vows you are about to receive don't do it for you; if the music and the great crowd of people gathered here prove insufficient; if the challenges and opportunities of ministry accompanied by the promise of grace won't top you up to bursting; then the only charge left I can think of is you, me, a kite and a key, out back in the field during tonight's thunderstorm. Amen.

