

A Sermon preached on the occasion of the Ordination to the Diaconate of Claire Wimbush
 Saturday, January 9th at Bruton Parish Church
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Old Testament: Jeremiah 1:4-9
 Psalm 84
 Epistle: 2 Corinthians 4:1-6
 Gospel: Luke 22:24-27

O happy day! Ordinations are the big excitement in my life. If you are expecting from Claire's seminary professor a detailed exegesis of the text by a biblical scholar, or some careful analysis of the practice of ordination from a well-read theologian, then you will be disappointed by this sermon. I feel way too much joy to be that coherent. I want to share my excitement.

Claire and I landed at Duke the same week – both of us, in God's mysterious ways, with reasons from the sublime to the ridiculous. We may argue about which is which, but for now I will suggest the sublime, for Claire, included a rare scholarship in what is one of the country's top divinity schools. The ridiculous, in my book (or at least the mundane) has to do with timing: with the opening of a new building, better equipped than most for wheelchair access, not least with two ramps up to the chancel in the school's chapel. As you may know, Claire is not the typical Anglican who loiters in the back row. As the psalm put it, Claire's soul longs, it faints, for the courts and altars of the Lord!

Meanwhile I, just a few hours after daring to convince Homeland Security that the Episcopal Church needed an English Anglican on their soil, found myself leading a new student orientation for Claire and her peer group. Here I discovered I had been appointed their 'advisor'. Jetlagged and still driving on the wrong side of the road, Claire gently advised me what an advisor did. Advising gently, listening attentively; leading her peers (and sometimes guiding her professors) – often without them ever realizing. She has the rare ability to cut to the chase with the incisiveness of legal mind. Yet she wields that paring knife with the steady precision of a surgeon, a surgeon wearing kid gloves. You who know Claire will recognize these gifts. We may call it prophetic insight, but it is dressed not in a horse-hair shirt but a soft and elegant angora robe. People of St Martins: look out!

These were gifts recognized, I am sure, by her college chaplain, her rector, her bishop and the COM who have accompanied her through the complex processes of discernment towards ordination. In the church we invent systems that are lengthy and sometimes cumbersome to ensure that only those with the initiative and perseverance of Eagle Scouts make it to ordination. But at bottom Episcopalians are charismatics. That is, discernment is all about discerning the gifts and graces of God – the charisms with which Claire is invested by her maker – coupled, of course, with discerning the particular call of God. That is the starting point for a deacon. Or a priest.

Now, about God's gifts. Here's where the various readings we've just heard – like different windows of a building – shine from different angles that we may peak at the ways and works of God. As with the prophet Jeremiah, so (dare I say) with the prophet Claire, God knit her together in her mother's womb. Hear how God has been working for this day longer than anyone here – God the eagle scout of eagle scouts:

Before I formed you in the womb I knew you
 And before you were born I consecrated you (That is God dedicates us for holiness)

I appointed you a prophet to the nations (God maps our path, each of us travelling within God's plan and purposes).

Sometimes that path - that summons - feels like craziness. God is ridiculous!

'Ah Lord God, Truly I do not know how to speak for I am only a boy'

God hears the hesitation, the inadequacy, the need. God hears - responds. He does not deny the problems. He simply provides everything that we need to follow. It's the message of Christmas, of Emmanuel, 'Do not be afraid for I am with you'; coupled with the message of Easter, 'I am with you to deliver you'.

Claire: remember that. Future colleagues of Claire, repeat this often:

'Do not be afraid: for I am with you to deliver you'.

The greatest gifts are so big we sometimes don't see them.

It sure helps when the one who is called to be a prophet – that is, called to speak for God – recognizes the hand of God upon his mouth, touching him at just the locus of that future ministry. That which is most vulnerable. And most important.

Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me

"Now I have put my words in your mouth"

From that point on, the prophet cannot kid himself or anyone else that this is his ministry, as if it is Jeremiah's doing. It is God's call, God's gift, God's grace, God's words – God's prophet and God's ministry. Claire: your gifts are God's gifts, of which you are steward. Your ministry is not about you. It is for God's purposes and for God's glory. Blame God, if you will, for bringing you to this: because it is all God. But give God the credit every step of the way also. He who knew you before he formed you. He who consecrated you before you were born, and appointed you. He who made you the way you are, because he wanted one like you.

Now, I want to say a little bit about the psalm. If I tell you that this is Claire's favorite psalm, the first she ever learned, would it help you to see even more about Claire and her gifts from today's readings? This psalm is about the joy of worship, and the comfort-level of being in God's presence. That is something Claire knows and relishes. Around her you discover it's infectious.

'Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise'.

That is Claire, soaring like lark in God's house.

But the psalm is not naïve; it does not pretend that life is always easy, that the human spirit is always strong:

Happy are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion.

As they go through the valley of Baca, they make it a place of springs.

Now the valley of Baca is the hard place, the dry place – not the most obvious place to choose to build a well. Yet, the psalmist declares, 'the happy' – the blessed – are those who, going through the vale of misery, make it a place of springs. That is, those who have learned to re-read their circumstances and seek out God's blessing even in adversity. That takes drilling deeply and drinking deeply: to find water in a dry place. It is not for the faint-hearted. But where you see that paradox – strength in weakness – wow is it awesome. It is the journey I pray for all those on the path to ministry: whereby the discovery of brokenness may be the beginning of greater strength, where the admission of human weakness may foster God's opportunity. That way, the blows of future wounds may be the resource for new compassion. (Future wounds – yes, in ministry you will get hurt. Don't think the church is a safe place!). You know an old translation is the most evocative: when going through the valley of tears, use it for a well. The image conjures up for me a little bottle – in which tears of pain are collected, and treasured – to become the early morning dew that waters the land and ultimately wells into pools for new life.

I'm hesitant to speak of this kind of experience as gift – it does not come with nice wrapping paper and it is hardly one any of us would choose. But it is experience that becomes gift, and a crucial one for ministry. It cuts through any blithe notions of happiness; it dismisses the desire for quick gratification; it redefines our categories of disability and ability. It strengthens us to serve.

Thank you, Claire, for this rare gift. It knocks me off my feet. Most of us need that, and regularly.

Not least because, as the epistle puts it, the god of this world blinds our minds from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. The problem is we look for glory in glitz, forgetting that the glory of Christ is found at the cross, that God's greatest glory is evidenced at the place of greatest pain.

The final gift I want to explore – through the lens of the gospel reading – has to do with service. Claire, in a few moments you are to be made a deacon. A deacon is one who serves. That is, one who knows he or she is not in charge. One who operates at the behest of someone more important. One who works for the benefit of others. One who does not expect to earn much acclaim or money for doing so. One who does not distinguish between rich and poor. Unless to favor the poor.

Yet the story of the disciples suggests that even those closest to Jesus couldn't get this. Sadly, the history of the church is littered with examples that suggest many of its members – the clergy especially – don't get this. Claire, can you change that?

Even if you can't, I propose suggesting there's someone with you who might. She already wears a 'dog collar'. (how could I fail to mention Willa and her gifts?) From today I propose changing Willa's job title from 'service dog' to 'deacon-dog'. That she may ever remind you of the role – once a deacon, always a deacon (even when you become a priest). Ps.84 mentions the role of 'door-keeper in the house of the Lord' – there is Willa. Here is one who knows she operates at another's behest, who does not earn much money, who does not care about greatness... and who loves to pick up the things that other people drop. The deacon whose life is service. And, as with other important people in her life, must continue to ground the clergy-Claire.

Claire – or should I say 'Claire and Willa' – I haven't exhausted your gifts and nor have you. But notice how I've pointed to a range of types – those we're born with (Jeremiah), to those we discover amidst our delights (worship), to those we grow through the knocks and accidents of life (patience, perseverance), and to those we glean from the company we keep (service).

I want you to recognize three things about each and all of them:

- 1) They're not flashy
- 2) They're not fail-proof
- 3) They're not really about you.

Claire, even your ordination is not really about you. It's about God, and the people of God with the spirit of God. The God who has shed some particular gifts and graces in your direction (for which the rest of us are very thankful, and very excited). And about the God of Christmas and Easter who proclaims ever anew: 'Do not be afraid, for I am with you, to deliver you'