

Greensville Corrections Center
 Ministry Licensing of Matthew Harper
 January 12, 2020
 1st Sunday after Epiphany, The Baptism of our Lord (A)
 A Sermon by the Rt. Rev. James B. Magness

Isaiah 42:1-9
 Acts 10:34-43
 Matthew 3:13-17
 Psalm 29

“Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
 my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
 I have put my spirit upon him;
 he will bring forth justice to the nations.”

Once upon a time there was a United Methodist layperson from the Southwest Texas town of Mission. His name was Tom Landry. Many of you who recognize the name Tom Landry will not connect him with either the United Methodist Church or the town of Mission, Texas. However, you may recall that for twenty-nine years Tom Landry was the head coach for a professional football team by the name of the Dallas Cowboys. He has been hailed as one of the most effective coaches in the entire history of the National Football League.

A few years before his death he was asked a revealing question. What is the difference between a run-of-the-mill NFL player and an All Pro (or star) NFL player. His answer was: twelve inches. That is the twelve inches between the head and the heart.

The all pro star football player is the person whose heart is in the game; who is playing for more than a big salary or an NFL Super Bowl ring.

Do you know the difference between a person who generally identifies himself or herself as a Christian, and a person who is called by God into a life of following Jesus? About twelve inches. People whose heart is in this game are all-in to being a follower of the Lord Jesus.

As in no time in my life, today we need persons whose heart leads them to be a follower of Jesus. People...

Who know they are called to be God's witness to people in a hurting world.

Who look outside themselves and see the need of broken people//

Who look inside themselves and see their own brokenness//

Who can look up and understand who they are // and who God is // and know the difference between the two//

Who have been transformed by Jesus the lamb of God//

Who are prepared for a lifetime of serving God and God's people//

Who operate not out of their own power, intellect or ability, but out of the connection between their head and their heart//

And Matthew, for those and other reasons, we are here with you today. In the name of God and God's people we want to affirm that you, as a disciple of Jesus, are so called to be a leader in this Christian community – this congregation.

In the 6th Chapter of the Old Testament book of the prophet Isaiah is the story of how God called Isaiah into a life of servanthood. After Isaiah rightly identified himself as a man of unclean lips – and with an unclean heart – Isaiah is purified by the heat of a white-hot coal to his lips. Then we hear the voice of God – the same God who stated from the heavens “This is my beloved Son, in Him I am well pleased” – that there is work to be done in and with the community of God's people. The heavenly voice of God continues, “Who can I send to do the work that needs to be done?” When you hear God's question the prophet Isaiah “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” will you respond, as Isaiah responded to God, “Here am I, send me?”¹

To say "send me" takes you to people who are rarely encountered by most the leaders of the faith community I represent. Your calling takes you into places where most Christians rarely go. Your "send me" takes you to a mission field where you are a shepherd with a unique flock of persons.

To say “send me” enables you to share in their joy, and shoulder their pain - sometimes simultaneously. There are moments when they cannot care for themselves. At those times you are called to bless them and to offer them the solace of the one who died for them. You are called to be an instrument of God's peace who willingly and unflinchingly takes your own brokenness as a leader of God's children.

In the midst of a very uncertain world, simultaneously we embrace a very certain faith. Matthew, through your choosing to be a Christian leader, you are renewing your baptismal commitment to be, in the words of Jesus, a shepherd of God's sheep.

This evening, Matthew, you are saying “yes” and here am I, send me” to a number of things that tell us that the twelve inch connection between your head and your heart exists.

You are saying yes to the ominous responsibility to keep and teach our faith as found in Holy Scripture, and handed down to us by our spiritual mothers and fathers.

You are saying yes to "not my will but your will, O Lord."

You are saying yes to a willingness to take a road you have never traveled and which, if not for the church that helped you discern your calling, you may never have chosen.

¹ Isaiah 6:1-6, NRSV.

Though you alone are being ordained as a priest of the Church of Jesus Christ this morning, certainly you are surrounded, to use the language of the New Testament epistle to the Hebrews, "...by so great a cloud of witnesses."

One of the greatest challenges to people in ordained ministry is congruence and transparency. A few years ago theologian and writer Eugene Peterson wrote, "...only when we do the Jesus-truth in the Jesus-way do we get the Jesus-life." He goes on to say, "But this isn't easy. It is easier to talk about what Christians believe... It is easier to talk about what Christians do..."

A story is told from the first two centuries of the Christian church in the Roman Empire, probably during the vicious rule of Emperor Diocletian, when there were seasons of severe persecution. Roman officials were ignorant of the actual teachings and practices of Christians. Often these Roman officials acted out of bigotry, fear and misinformation. They assumed that the growing Christian church operated along the same lines as the pagan religions. One emperor, coveting the wealth he believed the Christians possessed, summoned the archbishop to his palace and ordered him to produce "the treasures of the church."

The bishop sent the emperor a message in which he protested that the church had no gold, jewels or other valuables, which was true at that point in history. But the emperor brushed aside his objection, and demanded that the riches of the church be brought to him in the very next morning.

The next day the bishop dutifully appeared at the palace doorway, empty-handed.

The emperor raged, "I told you to bring me the treasures of the church!"

The bishop then invited the emperor to look out at the palace steps. Gathered together, peering sheepishly at the great doors of the royal palace rising above them, was a mass of common people including ragged beggars, cripples, slaves, and outcasts.

With a sweep of his arm, the bishop said, "These are the treasures of the church."

Matthew, these are our people, because they are God's people. In this place God is forming a Christian community of his followers. Your calling is, in partnership with Chaplain Donna Smith, to continue to form the community. It is the community's responsibility to form those who want to be a part of the community.

GOD CALLS US to labor in the places where they live.

GOD CALLS US to labor with our fellow Christians, to care for God's people in all times and places.

GOD CALLS US wherever there is need for a healing word.

GOD CALLS US wherever people hunger and thirst for righteousness.

GOD CALLS US wherever people mourn or bow beneath the yoke of oppression.

Matthew, your role as a Christian leader in this place is to bring God's people to the refining, purifying, comforting and at times uncomfortable truth of the Gospel – the truth which confronts, transforms and beckons us to action.

Matthew, yours is to journey with God's people on a pathway to our Lord Jesus.

Continue to be faithful to the call of God's Holy Spirit, wherever and whenever you hear it.

At all times resist the temptation to trouble yourself with determining who is worthy to receive your ministry.

Simply show up to work alongside God's people giving them a glimpse of God's kingdom.

AMEN.