



## *“In the Grip of God’s Call”*

Isaiah 6:1-8; 2 Corinthians 4:1-6; Mark 10:41-45

Rev. Dr. David C. Fisher

**September 18, 2011**

**4:00 P.M.**

The Ordination of Julie Johnson Staples

Forty years ago, May 23, 1971, I sat where you sit today, Julie. I don’t recall many details of that day so long ago. I do remember thinking that setting, a small white-frame country church, seemed inadequate for the magnitude of the event. I sensed that something really big was occurring—at least it seemed huge to me. I recall taking my ordination vows with fear and trembling. I knelt in front of that humble congregation for the ordination prayer, and members of my congregation and the ordained clergy came around me and laid hands on my head. I remember the feel of those hands. They bore the weight of eternity. I knew that moment changed my life irrevocably. Something eternal was in play, something much larger than appearances. I knew I was in the grip of a call from beyond myself. And, I sensed then, as I do now, that I am not adequate for this work.

I also remember thinking we should make a bigger deal of the ceremony. We needed to be in a cathedral with some high church pomp and circumstance, some colorful vestments, a grand procession, perhaps even a bishop to dress things up a bit.

However simple that old country church, or how plain and low church the ordination service, it was a very large moment—for me, for that church, and for the larger people of God. In that moment and in this ordination today, a very human being and a sinful one at that, was and is being set apart by God and the people of God to do the work of eternity. As St. Paul puts it, “We hold in our hands an imperishable treasure.” God entrusts us with the Word, the sacraments, and trusts us to care for God’s own people. And Paul goes on to write that we servants of the Word and sacraments are no more than clay pots holding that treasure. What an incomparable and risky trust from God!

There is a glory to the ordained ministry. We are clay pots entrusted with divine work. That work is so large and profound, Paul uses a series of powerful metaphors in and around the Epistle text to describe the ministry. We are captives of Christ in a glorious parade celebrating God’s triumph over principalities and powers, sin and death. We are an aroma of incense wafting up from that parade filling the air with the fragrance of God’s grace. We are engravers who write God’s truth on the hearts of God’s people. Elsewhere, Paul writes this work of ministry is like a nursing mother gently caring for an infant—and like a strong and

admonishing father guiding his children. This work which we do is not our work, it is God's work.

I sat on the platform that day and listened. I realized powerfully and afresh that I was—and am—somehow and uniquely God's man and that I'd been given a life work larger than life itself. I was overwhelmed. Who in their right mind dares to stand at the crossroads of time and eternity and claim to speak and act for God?

Yes, Julie, this is a big deal. The plainness of our Congregational tradition may obscure both the significance and the power of this hour. The larger community may be oblivious to this ceremony, even scornful of what it represents, but I assure you that heaven is in a festive mood today. The saints and angels ponder this grace that sets ordinary children of God apart for divine work. The prophets, apostles and martyrs hold their breath as once again God reaches into time and space to grasp another servant with this strange and wondrous calling. The ancients, bishops, doctors of the church, along with the entire great cloud of witnesses, watch and wonder, for what we do here today bears the weight of eternity.

I sensed something of that glory back then. I certainly know more of it after forty years on this pastoral journey. Older, wiser, bowed and bloodied, but not beaten down, I know one thing for sure: the church and its ministry possess a powerful and wonderful glory.

#### THE GLORY OF THE MINISTRY

Today, Julie, you enter an ancient and honorable work. You enter what an ancient prayer of the church, the *Te Deum*, calls "the glorious company of the apostles, the goodly fellowship of the prophets, the noble army of martyrs...."

This work is as old as the people of God. You stand on the shoulders of the priests of Israel who, by divine command, were dressed in magnificent vestments and wore tall headdresses so that they would have "dignity and grandeur" to match their work.

You join that goodly fellowship of the prophets, men and women conscious that they spoke not for themselves, but for God. The biblical prophets were grasped by a divine call to speak to God's people and the world on behalf of God.

Isaiah is a case in point. Stunned by a vision of the transcendent glory of God, overwhelmed by a sense of his own sinfulness and inadequacy, and touched by the forgiving grace of God, Isaiah sensed the call of God to speak for God. "Here am I, send me," he said. In the grip of that call to speak the word of God, Isaiah began a prophetic journey that transformed a people, touched the world, and continues to be a powerful word in synagogues and churches to this day.

The prophet Jeremiah, like many of us, tried repeatedly to escape from the grip of that call. But, he writes, God's word is like fire in my bones that I cannot escape and which must be proclaimed.

This transforming word must be proclaimed. Isaiah 40 puts it powerfully and beautifully,

Get you up to a high mountain,  
Zion, herald of good tidings;  
lift up your voice with strength,  
Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,  
lift it up, do not fear;

say to the cities of Judah,  
“here is your God!”

You sense that prophetic calling, Julie. God is calling you to a ministry of the Word which, like fire in your bones, must be preached and taught. In a unique and powerful way, you belong to God—and to the people of God.

You are in the grip of a wondrous call which is, at the same time, a terrifying call—or it should be. We have no words of our own, no credibility on which to rely. We are given a divine word and the call of God to teach it. You have heard Christ’s call to Peter, “Feed my sheep, tend my lambs.” You said “Yes”—and here you are.

From this day on, you will stand on the shoulders of priests and prophets, apostles and martyrs, great doctors of the church and unnamed and uncounted ordinary pastors and teachers of the people of God. I name a few notable prophets: Miriam, the sister of Moses; Isaiah’s unnamed wife; Deborah, the judge of Israel; Priscilla, Phoebe, and Phillip’s prophesying daughters, in the early days of the church; Antoinette Brown, Congregational pastor ordained in 1847; Catherine Booth, pastor and co-founder of the Salvation Army; and your contemporary, Barbara Brown Taylor. And, of course, you stand on the shoulders of your grandfather, Rev. C.L. Williams, your parents, your Sunday School teachers, and all the people of St. Paul’s AME Church in Des Moines, along with so many others along your journey.

Do not be fooled by appearance. God’s scale of measurement is larger and grander than ours. This work you enter today is eternal work. To quote Paul again, you are a “steward of the mysteries of God” called to be faithful in that stewardship. The apostle adds that we ministers are officially accredited “ambassadors of God” representing God, God’s character and God’s agenda on earth.

After all these years in ministry two things still boggle my mind and stun my soul: 1. God knows every stupid and sinful thing I’ll ever do and chose me for this work anyway. 2. God trusts me with his word, his people and his church. This work which we do is God’s work.

#### THE FOLLY OF THE MINISTRY

Nevertheless, Julie, as you already well know, most of the time living in the grip of God’s call doesn’t seem very glorious. I like the way Fredrick Buechner put it at a seminary graduation:

It’s a queer business that you have chosen or that has chosen you. It’s a business that breaks the heart for the sake of the heart. It’s a hard and chancy business whose risks are as great as its rewards. Above all else, perhaps, it is a crazy business....It is a crazy and foolish business to work for Christ in a world where most of the people most of the time don’t give a hoot in hell whether you work for him or not. It is crazy and foolish to offer a service that most people most of the time think they need like a hole in the head....When it comes to the business of Christ and his church, how unreal and irrelevant a service it seems, and at times especially, to the ones who are called to it.<sup>1</sup>

This work seems foolish because no one wants to live with a broken heart, yet ministry by its very nature is heartbreaking work. We walk through the extremes of life with God’s people.

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<sup>1</sup> *A Room Called Remember*, p. 142.

We see them as their sinful worst, when they reject or defy God. That hurts. Most of all it hurts when people to whom we've given our lives reject that gift.

This work is not about bottom lines, nor is it the ministry of ideas, important as those may be. Our work is about life and death, heaven and hell, for better and worse, richer and poorer, sickness and health. That stuff hurts and that should not surprise us. After all we follow one who tells us take up a cross, his cross, and follow him.

This work seems crazy because it's impossible. It is soul work. That includes bending wills, reshaping hearts, changing minds and challenging people's most cherished values. This work is subversive work. Given human nature, it is excruciatingly difficult work. Ministry is only measured in the long term and its vital signs are seldom visible. You will want to quit 1,000 times.

And yet...*And yet*. There is certain "and yetness" to the ministry. It's a crazy foolish, painful and impossible business. *And yet* here you are. *And yet*, here we are. *And yet* we are in the grip of a call from beyond ourselves. You will be torn in half by this work, crushed by its burdens and overwhelmed by the weight of eternity. You will be worn down by small minds and small vision, frustrated by the snail's pace of soul work and the even slower pace of church work. *And yet*, here you are. Here we are.

You are here, Julie, because you heard the magisterial call of Christ, "follow me." You also heard the majestic voice of Almighty God that gripped you in a call that brings you to this moment. You are here because you are in the grip of God's call.

In a few minutes, in a solemn act of the church that is at the same time an act of God, we will lay hands on your head and lay hands on your soul in an official ecclesiastical act that sets you apart for ministry. This outlandish ceremony will send you off to outlandish work in which you will spend our life doing outlandish things for our outlandish God.

You will be no different after this day than before. Our hands confer no special sanctity nor does this service convey any spiritual virtue. You will still be a fallible sinner, a clay pot. But you will be in the employ of the king of the universe. Your work, this important work of ministry so limited by our humanity, is God's work. And wonder of wonders, God still chooses to do this work through people like us.

So what else can I say? What can anyone say? Maybe the same thing Mary, the mother of Jesus, said on the occasion of her ordination is quite enough. Called to a unique ministry that combined glory and agony, Mary answered the Lord, "Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." Then she sang, "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant...for the mighty one has done great things for me."

Amen.