



“We Have This Ministry”

Jeremiah 1:4-10; 2 Corinthians 2:14-16, 3:1-5; John 21:15-21

Rev. Dr. David C. Fisher

June 12, 2011

4:00 p.m.

Ordination of Alvin Bunis

This room is a unique intersection of time and eternity. For 164 years the people of God have gathered in this house, God’s House, to meet the risen Christ and to hear the word of the God and come to Christ’s Table. We come here because God calls to come. We come because this is where we meet God.

Of course, God meets us anywhere and everywhere. But God promises that to meet us in a unique and powerful way in the Lord’s House. Each gathering of God’s people is filled with divine potential and is, in a sense, unrepeatable.

Jesus promised, “Where two or three of you are gathered in my name, I am in your midst.” Christian worship celebrates the presence of the risen Christ and where the Risen One is present, nothing can ever be quite the same. The great Swiss theologian Karl Barth put it this way.

The worship of God is the most important, momentous and majestic thing that can take place on earth because its primary content is not the work of man but it is the work of God.¹

Al, family members, distinguished guests, members of this congregation, we are standing on holy ground. And here, front and center, in this sacred space, life-altering events and experiences occur on a regular basis. Couples stand there, front and center, make solemn vows before God and are joined in Covenant of Marriage. Here, up front and center, parents bring their children to be baptized by making solemn vows to God and we make covenant with them welcoming each child in Christ’s name. Last week twelve of our own stood up front and center to affirm their baptismal vows and join this church in the sacred rite of confirmation. And when a life ends, we return to this spot where family and friends celebrate the life and faith of one they love.

Along the way, the people of God come here to up front and center, to celebrate Holy Communion, an act in which Christ feeds his people. We are standing on holy ground.

In a few minutes, Alvin Bunis will stand in this sacred space and take holy vows of ordination. Then, in the spot where he has celebrated Communion and soon will baptize a child, he will kneel in front the pulpit where he regularly proclaims the Word of God.

¹ “The Knowledge of God and the Service of God According to the Teaching of the Reformation,” Gifford Lectures, 1937-38, Edinburgh University.

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On that sacred and powerful spot, up front and center, we will lay hands on his head and his soul officially authorizing him to do the work of the Christian ministry. Our hands will bear the weight of eternity. We are setting Al apart to do what God and this congregation called him to do: stand at the intersection of time and eternity and do the work of almighty God, the most important, majestic and momentous work in the world.

To be in the Christian ministry is no small matter. It's a big deal. The watching world may not think what we are doing here this afternoon amounts to much. We likely won't make the evening news! The church may not make much of it either. There is no Easter throng here this afternoon.

But I assure you, this is a big deal. This work we pastors do is significant, awesome and, often, frightening work. It's a high stakes venture. It's a matter of life and death, time and eternity. We stand on holy ground and do holy work—God's work. This work which we do is not our work, it is God's work.

This work of the ministry is an ancient and honorable work. It is as old as the people of God. We stand on the shoulders of the priests of ancient Israel who handled holy things on behalf of God. Al, you join a long, long procession that includes the prophets of Israel, men and woman like Moses and Miriam, Samuel and Deborah, each conscious that they spoke not for themselves but for God.

This prophetic work is also apostolic and sacramental. The apostles of Christ hand to us a work of word and sacrament that links us to the entire company of pastors, teachers, evangelists and doctors of the church.

That apostolic train includes biblical figures like Peter, Priscilla, Paul and Phoebe; historical figures like Augustine, Calvin, Luther, Wesley, Antoinette Brown, Phoebe Palmer, Catherine Booth and Henry Ward Beecher; contemporary figures like Barbara Brown Taylor, Martin Copenhaver and Walter Brueggemann, and a myriad of others known and unknown. That company now includes Al Bunis.

Yes this is a big deal. The Apostle Paul uses several powerful metaphors in our Scripture Lesson to emphasize the significance and character of the Christian ministry. The apostle was in the awkward spot of defending his ministry to critics of the church in Corinth.

They wondered if he had letters of recommendation, perhaps, to back up his ministry. Paul writes to tell them that he had a credential much larger than any formal letters, larger than any seminary degree, greater than an ordination certificate.

They, the Church at Corinth, they were his letter of recommendation. Look at yourselves, he suggests. Do you see the evidence of God's work in your lives? Don't you realize that not long ago you were pagans, and now are the temple of God's Spirit? Don't you understand that God was in work in my labor among you? You came to faith through my labor. I organized you into a community of living faith. I instructed you and empowered you to share my ministry among yourselves and in your community. He adds, "Through my ministry, God wrote a letter of recommendation in your hearts."

Christian ministry is writing God's lines in the hearts of God's people. Each word, every gesture done in God's name makes marks in people's lives. For better and for worse!

I recall sitting at my ordination service listening to my father preach the ordination sermon using this same text. I looked out over the congregation God had entrusted to my care and was struck by the glory and the gravity of that responsibility. I remember thinking about how words and acts might write God's lines in people lives. I distinctly recall imagining my hand extended out over the congregation, my hand trembling with

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the weight of the responsibility, and asking God to help me write good lines, even poetry, in their lives. I very much felt like the prophet Jeremiah in our Old Testament Lesson who knew he was too young, too inarticulate and too human to do God's work. I was struck by the weight of responsibility and the honor of my calling.

Later in 2 Corinthians, Paul uses another metaphor to describe the ministry. "We ministers," he writes, "hold the imperishable treasure of the gospel in vessels of clay." Ministers are vessels of clay. We are fallible. We are weak. We crack and chip. We get hurt and sometimes hurt others. We come and we go. Nevertheless we clay pots are entrusted with—we hold in our hands—an imperishable treasure: God's word and God's people. It's a wonder and a mystery. No wonder Paul asks rhetorically, "Who is adequate for these things?" Well, no one is.

Our clay potness and the clay potness of our congregations make our work impossible but for the grace of God. This work is impossible work because it is God's work not ours. It is impossible because its object is humanity: our own and our people's. None of us have sufficient resources to do God's work. Ministry, in the final analysis, is not really about church organization, administration, council meetings, committees and assorted meetings. It's more than worship services, sermons and pastoral care. It is all those things to be sure. But it's more. In the final analysis, our work is soul work. All we do and say, the work of the ministry, points at the lives of the people entrusted to our care. It's a matter bending wills, reshaping hearts, changing minds and challenging, even altering, some of life's most cherished values. This work is measured in the long term and its vital signs are seldom visible.

And, never forget, Al, this work which we do is not our work, it is God's work. The Gospel Lesson is that memorable encounter of Peter and the risen Christ. Jesus asked Peter three times, "Do you love me." Peter answered three times, "Yes, Lord you know I do." Jesus replied, "Feed my sheep, tend my lambs, guard my flock." That is the Christian ministry, loving Christ the Lord and tending, loving, guarding, feeding God's people.

Ministry is, therefore, heart-breaking labor. We walk through the extremes of life with God's people. Their broken hearts break ours. We see people at their best and their worst. Our work is about life and earth, heaven and hell, sickness and health, broken dreams and shattered lives. We stand on holy ground, to be sure, but we also stand at gravesides, bedsides, hospices and nursing homes. What can you say, what can anyone say when you stand together at the boundaries of life with people you love?

Most of our life and ministry is more ordinary, thank God. But even at its best, this ministry doesn't often feel like holy ground. So much time is spent in the business of the church, which seems so ordinary, even mundane, and seldom spiritual. We disappoint our congregations and they disappoint us too. Ministry in the church seems very, very human much of the time.

The Book of Common Prayer has a wonderful prayer for ministers, often used at ordination and installation services. It begins, "O Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, YET you have called your servant to stand in your house and serve at your altar."

And yet, the prayer confesses. And yet. There is a certain and-yetness to the Christian ministry. This is painful and impossible work. And yet here you are Al! You are no pastoral babe in the woods. You've been around the church a bit. And yet you are here! And yet we are here? Why?

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The easy answer, Al, is that you are in the grip of a call that will not let you go. God summoned you to this work and here you are. God has given you wonderful gifts for ministry which you have surrendered for use in God's work. And here you are.

But behind your call and your gifts lies a more fundamental reason you are here and we are all here today. You are here and we are here for one reason and one reason only: Jesus Christ. He summoned you and here you are. He called you into his service, Al, and here you are. In his name we will lay hands on your head and you will spend your life laying hands on people's souls in Christ's name and in his power.

You know well by now that your life is not your own. In a unique way you belong to Jesus Christ and you belong to the church he dares call his body. You will continue to spend your life in the service of the one who called you to this Holy Ground.

But the fact of the matter is, you will be no different after this service than before. Your ordination promises no ontological change that makes you different from other humans. No special sanctity is conferred by our hands on your head, no virtue is passed on to you. You will still be a clay pot, a sinner, in the employ of Jesus Christ. 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 to God 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.

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