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-ORDINATION SERMON BC CONFERENCE JUNE 5 1977

What is this occasion?

Certain candidates, who in diverse times and places indicated that they felt themselves called by God to the order of Ministry, who have undergone some initial preparation which has been judged satisfactory, and who have had their calls tested by the church, come now to the the point where the United Church of Canada, through B.C. Conference says to them " It seems good to the Holy Spirit and to us that you be received into the order of ministry.

One way to illuminate that question "What's the occasion?" is to ask another one. "What does one say to a candidate upon his or her ordination?" Does one congratulate an ordinand, as though we were marking some accomplishment on his or her part? Congratulations seem more appropriate to the time of their graduation from seminary. Does one welcome them? Does one commisirate with them? Does one stand before them in silent prayer?

What is appropriate?

I get caught on this question at every ordination service I attend. On the night I was asked to preach at this ordination service the question presented itself again, with greater urgency.

In the middle of my search for an answer I was suddenly caught up into a state of total recall. The remembered occasion took place on the campus of UBC in the mid-sixties. I was in a dreadful hurry and a young man of my acquaintence approached.."Jack, can we talk? I am headed .. "I am going here with this person and I have to go there after that, but if you can come along,we will stop at Brock Hall on the way to the other place" When we settled at a table in the crowded coffee shop at Brock Hall he said, "I want to marry your daughter."

There was a pause, and then I broke up. The young man sat there for what must have felt like five minutes while wave after wave of unrestrained laughter cascaded out of me. It had been a long long time since I had

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laughed with such abandon. As I caught sight of the young man's puzzled countinance I began to identify what was happening to me.

1. Something was getting decided. If you recall, the sixties were troubled times, especially at the universities. The ground had disappeared - from beneath a whole student generation. There weren't any directions. But here something was getting decided.

2. Somebody wanted my girl. You would appreciate the depth of my feeling more if you knew just what genetic inheritance and environmental conditions had produced in her. Would anyone else see the gold I saw through the questionable appearances?

3. What a quaint old fashioned thing... To be asked... An old fashioned ritual was still meaningful. Son & father

4. What a first class person to have added to the family.

I think I know why I had such a vivid recall of that event. .... Very similar feelings arise in me when I am before someone who feels called and, with however much ambiguity, also wants into the order of ministry of the United Church of Canada.

As part of the liturgical office whereby we say "Yes" to this desire and "Amen" to this call, what is the preacher's role?

I think I have discovered that there isn't one which is not presumptuous. ... so I picked my presumption. I am going to be personal. I could presume by outlining a crash course in ministry, in case Vancouver School of Theology or Union Theological Seminary left something out. I could presume to deliver myself of a paper on my doctrine of orders, in case you VST grads left some gaps in the papers you sweated all spring to deliver yourselves of. Instead I am going to presume to be personal, in the hope that with that confession up front, the dynamics will operate so that I also be representative.

After hours of casting about for an answer to the question, "What was

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I asked to do when I was asked to preach the Ordination Sermon?" I settled for this expression of the request.....

" HEY OLD MAN . . . BLESS US! I can even produce a Warrant — Representative — St Paul — FATHER BLESS ME

In June of 1967 I had the rare privilege of attending a week long workshop on the theology of Detrich Bonhoeffer conducted by Eberhart Bethge, who is his Boswell nephew in law, a one time student of his, the recipiant of most of his letters from Prison, his biographer and interpreter. In trying to get at what Bonhoeffer meant by the theological significance rather than the religious significance of Jesus Christ.. in his religionless Christianity.. Bethge said something like this. "What is a theological sentence? One that judges, preserves, liberates, enables, BLESSES... you know, facts need blessing." I simply had to hear him say more about this so I sat with him for supper that night and asked "Say some more about a sentence that blesses." He told me a story. It was about a movie he and his children attended. The youngsters were caught up in it but couldn't quite make out why. On the way home they said "Dad, say something"

It seems that for facts to be blessed, something has to be said.

First of all, I want to say that I think we made significant progress in our long struggle with our doctrine of orders ~~when we came~~ when we came up with the notion REPRESENTATIVE ministry to describe what is distinct about the order of ministry.

It means that we are are proclaiming that all other marks of ministry are not special to the order of ministry. Priest, theologian, prophet, servant, these are the marks of every believer, not special to you as ordinands. Indeed our deepest experience and our deepest understanding of the Christian faith have brought us to see that, however individualized the faith became in Jesus Christ, it can happen only through a people.

What Ordaining you does/is entitle you to be representative of that people.

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It follows from this position that you will have no ministry if what you represent doesn't have one.

It seems to me therefore that ~~especially~~ someone on the threshold of especially before a question ordination is the size of an abys. Whether what you are about to represent is a community of faith at all or not, and , as you wait for God to speak his word whether you are waiting for anything at all or not.

If you weren't in some such state of holy fear I'd be much less ready to add my yes to the whole thing today.

The kind of blessing I'd like to see performed would bless that state of being before that abysmal question, without removing it before the time. ... that is the kind of blessing that would make it indeed a HOLY fear.

In one of his last letters to Bethge from prison, Bonhoeffer slipped in this remark."It takes a long time to know where Christ is being formed in the congregation... this will be especially true of any congregation you are likely to get."

Whatever your congregation, it will not be given to you in order for you to complain to God about it, but for you to come to recognize where Christ is being born in it. Recognition is after all a big word in all the resurrection stories.

At this time the most useful comment it occurs to me to make is this. "Don't stomp on it.

With crises everywhere, in and out of the church, it is hard to focus. But I think we have a very special and central one right now. And that is the dropout from the church, of people who have been denied their ministry. We sometimes cheer ourselves with the notion that the dropout trend is due to a purging of fat from the rolls. To the extent that is true we have no need to worry. But the worrysome dropout trend is the tragis loss of people who have not been allowed to have their ministry.

And nobody is better at causing that than the pro's. We hear a lot about the loss of power to the pro,s. One can hear a persistant ground tone of bemoaning that condition. But one thing we pro,s still have power to do..

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and that is prohibit the non-pros their ministry. How does one get to be a pro in recognizing when Christ is being born in the congregation?
I want to mention another recognition that I think has the potential of blessing. That is the recognition of the connection between having and not having, especially in the matter of where God is showing his hand and whether He is or not.

In our present time./As we try to live responsibly in the corner Western Civilization has painted itself into.// .. as we face the situation in which, what used to be Christendom, and what here and there still considers itself to be Christendom, is the fat cat in a very lean world, with the dynamics working so the fat get fatter and the lean leaner. Given such a time we ought to be deathly afraid of anyone who knows just what God is up to.

Can not-having be blessed?

Can brokenness be a God-given blessed state?

Our experience of the real world as it drives us to a deeper hearing of the Biblical Story, its motifs, metaphors and images indicate precisely that that is what they are about. There is a kind of brokenness and not having, that is a blessed state. for brokenness and not having is the only state in which we can be responsible. The only thing we will lose is our omnipotence, the central thing we are called to repent of is the state of being blameless.

Max Weber, one of the fathers of western sociology, had a lasting impact on the young bonhoeffer. He is reported to have said.

"The only responsible act is an impure one"

Our omnipotence and our blamelessness are well lost for the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus our Lord.

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The chief Biblical mark of the People of God is that it is a people called to HEAR God's word. The Biblical story of the people of God is replete with incidents in which God sends his people into exile, calls them into wilderness. The motif connecting wilderness and the travail of new birth

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* It sometimes seems to me that
We are more at home with the motifs in which the Word of God & the People of God possess the Word of God — and it is harder to speak that motif in the Bible.

We are more at home with the motif that God and Chaos are enemies of each other — & more penetrating look at the Biblical story comes upon the motif of God sending them among the people of the earth. — when humankind triumphantly chooses a coherence which is presumptuous. He sends disorder.

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a word that will sustain us aware and caring when to be so pleases us in a position where we hear no word.

occurs repeatedly.

The word we seek is ~~the~~ a word that will make the wilderness blessed - without working our cheap escape from it, and without abandoning us to the choice of paralysis and death. The word we seek is ~~the~~ a word that will work new birth in the wilderness, ~~the~~ a word that will create us responsible.

No matter what this old man says, there will be no blessing unless God blesses. There will be no ministry unless God creates it. No Christ born in us unless God is in Travail.

However it seems to me it makes some difference the company we keep as we wait on God.

There is a hymn to the Holy Spirit ... Vene Creator, it's a ninth century hymn. It has been sung ever since it was written, at the ordination of Priests. Let us join eleven centuties' of broken saints in the prayer -

Come Holy Ghost, our souls inspire
And lighten with celestial fire,
Enable with perpetual light
The Dullness of our blinded sight.
Annoint and cheer our soiled face
With the abundance of thy Grace.

Then leap to the 19th century for the words of another hymn which could have come out of any Christian Century, and which for inexplicable reasons was left out of the new hymn book.

We come unto our fathers' God
Their Rock is our Salvation.
The fire divine their steps that led
Still goeth bright before us.
The heavenly shield around them spread
Is still high holden o'er us.

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The grace,those sinners that subdued

The strength, those weeklings that renewed

Doth Vanquish, doth restore us.