

Sermon
The Ordination of ClayOla Gitane to the Priesthood
The Episcopal Diocese of Forth Worth
December 5, 2009

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Psalm 84

Ephesians 4:7, 11-16

Luke 4:16-21

¹ How dear to me is your dwelling, O LORD of hosts! *

My soul has a desire and longing for the courts of the LORD;
my heart and my flesh rejoice in the living God.

² The sparrow has found her a house and the swallow a nest where she may lay her young; *
by the side of your altars, O LORD of hosts, my King and my God.

In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

She knows it is time. She can feel it within herself... deep within. She can't explain it and, in a way, she isn't even conscious of it. But she knows it is time.

She searches here and there for what she needs to finish the work. The grass is fully growing in the spring sun, plump and green... but there are still the brown sprigs underneath, left over from the cold winter. "Yes," she thinks, "they will do," and she plucks them up, one by one.

She goes to a nearby pool, left over from the rain a few days before. She settles at its edge and her feet lightly sink into the wet mud there. "Yes," she thinks, "this will do," and she takes a tiny bit and then another and then another.

She goes to the orchard. The trees are in full bloom, their scent drawing the bees to their own work. But on the ground she finds the small twigs she, somehow, knew would be here, and she picks them up: one, two, three.

After each of her journeys she flies back to the building—up under the eaves of the roof. And there she places the mud, the dried grass, the twigs. She builds the nest that she needs. She knows how to do it, but can't explain it and, in a way, she isn't even conscious of it. With patience and care, with a knowledge that can only come from her Creator, she fashions a place for herself and her family... safe from the chilling rain, safe from the brutal sun, safe from all harm.

In a few days, she is not alone. Two small mouths continuously chirp and call for food. And away she flies again, this time to find insects under the green grass, and worms in the moist mud, and creepy-crawlies underneath the trees of the orchard. And she brings them back to her young, who remain, safe inside the nest.

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The young man watches the smoke rise. He has just helped the older priest butcher the bull and burn the internal organs and, now, together they are roasting the meat for the family standing down below, at the foot of the altar. The smell is wonderful. He is so thankful... deep within. So thankful to be a young priest. So thankful to be able to serve in this holy place. So thankful to be one of the people responsible for maintaining this holy temple for God.

He stands there, beside the older man, in silence, both of them watching the meat broil and watching the smoke rise into the sky. He follows it and looks straight up and his eye catches a movement. It's a bird. He watches it and follows it in its flight. It swoops and turns and flies up into the eaves of the Holy Temple! His heart sinks.

A bird has built a nest in the Holiest building on earth.... probably even more than one bird. There is no doubt that if he were to climb up there, inside the walls of the temple, what he would find. Filth and feathers and trash... and, no doubt, a stench. All of it contaminating this holy place. Sometimes he gets so angry that the world seems so intent on desecrating this place where the presence of God dwells. First gentiles, then foreign armies, and now a flock of birds... it is so much work to protect and guard this place. It is almost too much.

He sees the bird come out and sit on the edge of the roof. He leans over to the old priest and motions up to the bird. "Look! Birds have infested the Temple! Should I go and crawl up and clean them out?"

The old man looks over at the bird, which flies away toward the orchard beyond the wall. He is silent for a minute and the younger man wonders if he heard him. "Should I...?"

The older man looks over at him and smiles and shakes his head slightly. He looks back at the sacrifice, raises his head as he watches the smoke arise, he opens his mouth and sings...

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Sisters and brothers, I ask a very simple question to you this morning: What does it mean to be a priest in the Church of God? What does it mean for someone to serve as a priest for the Body of Christ?

You know as well as I do that there are those who are giving very different answers to these questions today.

What does it mean to be a priest in the Church of God? Well, there are those who see the world, very basically, as a place fraught with danger, a place full of temptation, and a place that seeks constantly to destroy the Church. In such a world, what is a faithful response to that danger, that temptation, that destruction? It is, of course, to resist it, to stand up against it, and to fight it... and, finally, at the end of the day, to defend the Church from those dangers, temptations, and from that destruction.

What does it mean to be a priest in the Church of God? In this view, it is to defend the Church against those who would lead it astray and to make sure that none of that danger, that temptation, and that destruction finds its way into the Church. A priest, here, serves as a doorkeeper... making sure that those who belong, those who are right, those who believe rightly and live rightly have access to the Sacraments and ministries of the Church. And... make no mistake about it... a priest equally makes sure that those who do not belong... those who are not right... those who do not believe rightly or live rightly are not admitted.

Well, that's one way of seeing priesthood. And, I believe that it is a view that is more common than we'd like to admit.

Sisters and brothers, I ask a very simple question to you this morning: What does it mean to be a priest in the Church of God? What does it mean for someone to serve as a priest for the Body of Christ?

You know as well as I do that there are also those who see the world as a very flat place... a place where, well, basically everyone and everything is equal, and make no mistake about it, no one and nothing is special. There is no place in such a world for things like "destiny," or "vocation," or "holiness," or "sacrament." There's no "calling," no "Holy Orders." A priest in such a world is no different than a layperson... absolutely no different. What we are doing here today is awfully pretty, quite beautiful perhaps, but, really, actually, at its heart, it signifies nothing.

In such a world, what does it mean to be a priest in the Church of God? In this view, a priest cannot be a doorkeeper, because there is no door at all. Inside, outside... belonging, not belonging... participating, sitting out... it's all the same.

It would mean to stand up and say that the emperor has no clothes... to speak the truth that, in fact, there is absolutely nothing special about priesthood or what we do today or, in fact, that there is nothing special about the Church at all.

Well, that's another way of seeing priesthood. And, likewise, I believe that it is a view that is more common than we'd like to admit.

What does it mean to be a priest in the Church of God? What does it mean to serve as a priest for the Body of Christ?

Yes, being a priest means guarding the Church from all dangers that seek to undermine it. But the central danger in the modern church is the same as it was in the Judaism of Jesus' day... thinking of the Church as something too precious, too holy, too separate, needing to be protected from those outside.

No, whatever it means to be a priest, it means this... appreciating the Church and loving it... having a longing and a desire, one might even say a passion, for it... finding it your source of joy... and protecting it, not FROM those outside, but rather FOR those outside. It means seeing

the Church not as an exclusive club that has a lock on truth, or apostolic authority, or essential orthodoxy... call it what you will... but rather seeing it as a sanctuary, a place that is safe, and warm, and dry... a place where all are truly welcome... even the sparrows and the swallows... even people like me... even, perhaps, people like you, too.

Is everything the same... or, on the other hand, is there such a thing as holiness in our world? I, for my part, believe that there is. You see, the world, for all of its egalitarianism, all of its claims to equality, all of its denials of specialness or separateness... that world is really a very cruel and humiliating place. Against such a world, if holiness means anything, it means this:

Here is a place and here is a time that all are welcome.

The Church is holy, the church is special, precisely in this way: it is the one place on earth where all may come... the faithful and the doubting... the troubled and the calm... sinners and righteous... those questioning their faith and those finding deeper truths. This is what the church is about. And if being a priest means anything, it means building that sanctuary, and inhabiting that sanctuary, and safeguarding that sanctuary, even as a bird builds and inhabits and safeguards her nest.

ClayOla, will you stand, please, and face the congregation?

She knew that it was time. She could feel it within herself... deep within. She couldn't explain it and, in a way, she wasn't perhaps even conscious of it. But she knew that it was time.

She had reviewed her life... her childhood, young adulthood. She reflected on her role as mother and a student. And, here and there, she saw signs—intimations—that there was something... Someone...was working in her life, drawing her to what she must do. "Yes," she thought, "these memories are important," and she, like Mary in the Gospel of Luke, pondered these things in her heart.

She went to what, at the time, seemed a barren wilderness for confirmation of what she felt. Did others see in her what she sensed so deeply? And, although there seemed, at the time, to be little hope and little guidance, she, like Israel in the desert, found, here and there, springs of sweet water and bushels of manna to further her on her journey. She found those who saw within

her the gifts and graces, the signs and symbols that, yes, this is what she should... no, what she must... do. "Yes," she thought, "these witnesses are important," and she listened to them and allowed them to support her.

She went to school. And, even there—even there!—among the credits and classes, the exams and papers, the lectures and seminars... even there, she found signs that, yes, this is what she was meant to do, this is what she was born for.

And after these journeys she comes here, this morning, under the roof of this holy place. And here she brings the memories, the witnesses, the knowledge... she brings, in fact, her life. She can't explain it and, in a way, she isn't perhaps even conscious of it. But with patience and care, with a conviction that can only come from her Creator, she dedicates herself here, this morning. She dedicates herself to fashion a place for herself and for you and for us, but mostly for them... a safe place from the chilling rain, a safe place from the brutal sun, a safe place from all harm.

Within the hour, she will not be alone. She will be among us as a living sign of the grace that God extends to us all. And time and again she will draw from her memories, from what she has been and what she has known... she will draw from her very life... and she will turn and give it to us, to feed us. And she will do this in a warm, and dry, and safe place... a place that she safeguards, a place that can only be called a "sanctuary."

Amen.