

Not Just a Job, An Adventure

Michigan Area Annual Conference
Ordination Sermon

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Bishop David Alan Bard

Texts: Isaiah 20:1-6; John 1:35-42; II Corinthians 12:1-10

Greetings in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the peace and power of the Holy Spirit. I am again amazed to be standing here as your bishop, to celebrate, recognize, commission and ordain. There is something very special, and very holy about this service. For any of us who have been where these women and men are today, we recall those moments with joy and awe. I hope I never lose that sense of wonder about today.

I want to add my welcome to all who are here today, and want to thank, in particular, the family and friends, co-workers, and parishioners of those being recognized, commissioned and ordained. You have walked with these women and men as they have pursued their calling from God. They appreciate your support and so do I. I am also delighted to have with us Bishop Craig Satterlee from the North/West Lower Michigan Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. And some of you thought our new district names were a little complicated! Welcome Bishop Satterlee. It is an honor to share the joy of this day with you.

It's not just a job, it's an adventure. That was the recruiting slogan for ads run by the United States Navy when I was in high school and college. My Uncle Albert retired from the Navy as a Lieutenant Commander, and encouraged me to consider some educational possibilities with the Navy. Yes, I have an Uncle Albert in my family, but no Admiral Halsey, cue Paul McCartney.

It's not just a job, it's an adventure – great slogan. Good ideas can come from many places. The Navy may have used it as a recruiting slogan, but it is a pretty good description of ministry – not just a job, an adventure. To be sure there are adventures and there are adventures. Whatever your particular biblical hermeneutic, none of you has taken literally the example of God's call to Isaiah in chapter 20. "Go, and loose the sackcloth from your loins and take your sandals off your feet, and he had done so, walking naked and barefoot." Ray Stevens, "The Streak," was never intended to be a call song. Let me advise you as your bishop, whatever your biblical hermeneutic, please do not take this literally... ever!

Adventure. The word as a noun has something to do with an event or undertaking that could be considered hazardous or questionable or exciting. An adventure might take us into the uncertain or unknown, and ministry in the early twenty-first century certainly takes us into the uncertain and unknown. When I attended seminary in the early 1980s, we were still reading H. Richard Niebuhr's The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry in the course reflecting on Christian ministry, a book that predates my existence on this earth (1956). Richard Niebuhr is a brilliant theologian whose work bears continued reading. I think particularly of Christ and Culture, a book which, if read, would help us avoid the all too simple opposition between Christ and culture that I still hear in too many church conversations. Anyway, Niebuhr's book on ministry remains relevant in certain respects. His definition of the purpose of the church as "the increase among persons of the love of God and neighbor" (31) is pretty solid though we all may wish to elaborate on it a bit – like connecting this with making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. You may remember me saying, though it was a few days ago now, that God has a mission and love is at the heart of that mission. Niebuhr is even pretty

prescient when he writes about ministry as “the perplexed profession.” Yet, when he gets to identifying his conception of the heart of ministry, and here he is focusing on ministry as leading a congregation, the term he chooses - “pastoral director” (80) - seems woefully outdated. It had its limits in the early 1980s. The term seems a better fit for a time when the church was more central to the overall culture in which we lived. At one time, to be a good citizen or community member was to have a church affiliation. Churches often stood at the center of community life, and time was given in the calendar for church activities. Clergy were sometimes consulted about important events. Theologians like Paul Tillich, Karl Barth and Reinhold Niebuhr appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine.

The social location of the church and of its clergy has become dramatically de-centered. Robert Jones of the Public Religion Research Institute can write intelligibly about “the end of White Christian America” given the demographic changes in the United States, and religious disaffiliation. You know many of the statistics, such as young adults (18-29) are three times as likely as seniors to be a none – that is, claim no religious affiliation. When churches make the news it is often about scandal – sexual or financial, and the most prominent religious voices are often the most shrill.

The United Methodist Church finds itself in a tender place, a place of uncertainty and fragility. How “united” might we be after 2019 and 2020? We celebrate fifty years as a denomination this year – will we make it to sixty, and what might that look like? We all might feel about as vulnerable as old Isaiah out there without loin cloth or sandals, buttocks exposed.

In the midst of the uncertainty and the unknown, we understand that we need to be something more than and other than pastoral directors. We need new tools, new images and new ideas for ministry in this moment. In the first chapter of John, Jesus tells disciples of John the Baptist to “come and see.” The exact words are repeated later by Philip in his conversation with Nathanael – “come and see.” The church tries to help people hear that voice of Jesus, “come and see” – come and see God’s love for you, come and see how God’s love makes a difference in human lives, come and see how God’s love creates community, come and see how God’s love moves us in to the world to do justice, to make peace, to foster reconciliation, to break down dividing walls. But we are inviting people to come and see in a time when people are eminently distractible. Images flood us. Notifications bombard us. Come and see – oh, wait, I have a new text message. Come and see – oh wait, someone just posted a video on Facebook. Come and see – oh wait, just got a tweet. Come and see – oh wait, my pinterest is capturing my interest. Come and see -oh wait, my snap chat is chatting at me. Ours is not just a job, it is an adventure – and allow me to explore the nature of that adventure a bit more deeply and fully.

In his recent book, Canoeing the Mountains, Tod Bolsinger uses images from the Lewis and Clark expedition to describe ministry in our day and time. Canoeing the mountains is a great image of adventure for leading the church in our time. While Bolsinger writes about ministry leading congregations, and so more for those entering the ministry of Elder or Local Pastor, his insights are relevant for Deacons, too. After all, you are asked to help us connect church and world, and both are changing rapidly and simultaneously. Bolsinger offers helpful insights succinctly. He says that the world in front of us is nothing like the world behind us,

probably a bit of an over-exaggeration, but helpful. We are in a situation like Lewis and Clark, who were well prepared to paddle their way to the Pacific Ocean only to discover the Rocky Mountains up ahead. To lead off the map, though, we need to develop the important on the map skills. The danger in focusing on all the changes that are taking place in our world is that we might neglect to appropriately care for things that will continue to need attention – skills in the tasks of ministry matter – skills in preaching, teaching, administering, leading, managing change and conflict.

Here is a cautionary tale. The church I grew up in in Duluth, Minnesota received a pastor sometime in the late 1980s. About a year into his ministry, he attended a Vineyard workshop and became convinced that the church needed to move in that direction – no more choir, no more liturgy. The way some long-time members of the church described the change is that the pastor just came back from the workshop and fired the choir and the organist. Guitar music with words projected on a stand-up screen became the worship style. The church quickly hit defcon 1 for radioactive conflict. The church split and never fully recovered. The pastor left ministry. The church closed this year the Sunday after Easter. You have to develop good on the map skills for people to trust your leadership off the map, Bolsinger suggests. My home church no doubt needed to change, but how you work with change matters.

Bolsinger offers three more broad insights. Off the map, that is in canoeing the mountains, it is all about adaptive leadership, adaptive leadership where mission needs to be the focus and leaders need to stay focused, stay calm, stay connected and stay the course. Relational skills are critical, and know that there will be some conflict to navigate along the way.

Finally, everyone will be changed on the journey, including you. It's not just a job it's an adventure, an adventure of canoeing the mountains.

It's not just a job, it's an adventure, a deep and profound inner adventure. Bolsinger does not neglect this inner adventure dimension to leading the church in our day and time, but I want to develop this in my own way. Fully engaging the inner adventure of following Jesus, being led by God's Spirit, is critical for leadership that is canoeing mountains, and it is also critical for your health and well-being as beloved people of God.

I was recently struck by a few verses in II Peter which speak powerfully about this inner adventure (1:5-8). *You must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love. For if these things are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.* I was struck by this passage because it offers a unique picture of effectiveness and fruitfulness – growth in goodness, knowledge, self-control, endurance, godliness, mutual affection and love. These are qualities of Christian community the creation of which is also an adventure, and they are inner qualities. The adventure of leadership is the adventure of developing such qualities of character, qualities of soul and spirit. You are asked if you expect to be made perfect in love in this life. Here is a snapshot, and perhaps there is a certain perfection in the journey itself.

Another way to look at the inner adventure is to talk about the development of emotional intelligence. In research done a few years ago by the Alban institute, if you factor out

sexual misconduct, the number one reason for clergy to be terminated by a church was lack of skill in managing interpersonal relationships (Oswald and Jacobson, The Emotional Intelligence of Jesus, 120). In times of high anxiety, the church needs leaders who can manage their own anxiety, and that is an adventure. Emotional intelligence has to do with self-awareness/emotional self-awareness; self-management/what the writer of Peter might have called self-control; social awareness/empathy/awareness of group dynamics; and relationship management including conflict management. Growing in emotional intelligence is a life-long adventure of self-discovery, of inner learning and growth. Sometimes such work can leave you feeling naked and exposed, but it is needed soul work.

I also want to encourage you to continue to engage in the inner adventure of intellectual and theological growth. In a world mired in reactivity, a thoughtful faith could be a gift. Helping the church become more thoughtful could be a gift to the wider world as so many seek to play on our baser emotions like fear and anger. I will never forget an older clergy colleague from another denomination who was serving in the same community where I was serving my first appointment. One day at a clergy gathering he shared with me that he had not read one book on theology since graduating from seminary. He was a good pastor, a faithful person, but could he have been an even stronger pastor, could he have been an even better leader in his church and in his community if he had continued with some theological learning?

The inner work of leadership is an adventure. Paul describes it powerfully in II Corinthians 12. The inner adventure of following Jesus, of growing in the Spirit, of developing as a leader includes moments of ecstatic spirituality, and an awareness of pains, wounds and

weaknesses. It is the adventure of developing resilience for some of the insults and hardships that come with leading in an uncertain time, trusting the sufficiency of God's grace.

Adventure is a noun that has something to do with an event or undertaking that could be considered hazardous or questionable or exciting. Adventure can also be a verb. Please relax, I am not going to take long to explore the verb. We've got some other things to do here! To adventure can mean to proceed despite the risks. Today, you are adventuring into the adventure. Yes, there are risks. Yes, there are uncertainties. To lead the church in this day and time, to connect the church with the world in this day and time, requires life-long learning, requires skill development, requires soul work. It is the adventure of canoeing the mountains. It is the adventure of self-knowledge and self-development. Here is some good news, in the words of theologian Patricia Adams Farmer, *adventure is what we are made for: plunging into new territories, daring to open up to Beauty's rich intelligence and fascinating insights* (Embracing a Beautiful God, 46). Here is some good news, a root of the word "adventure" is advent. God shows up in this adventure. God calls **and** accompanies. We are all with you, too, fellow-adventurers, and best of all God is with us.

Let me end with a poem that I think does a nice job of capturing this adventure which can be also advent. The poet is Ranier Maria Rilke (Book of Hours, 88)

*God speaks to each of us as he makes us
then walks with us silently out of the night.*

These are the words we dimly hear:

*You, sent out beyond your recall,
go to the limits of your longing.
Embody me.*

*Flare up like flame
and make big shadows I can move in.*

*Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.
Just keep going. No feeling is final.
Don't let yourself lose me.*

*Nearby is the country they call life.
You will know it by its seriousness.*

Give me your hand.

It's not just a job, it's an adventure – embodying God, flaring up like flame. To all of us, following Jesus, being the church is an adventure: embodying God, flaring up like a flame is an adventure; loving God is an adventure; living neighbor creating love is an adventure; living that love which breaks down walls is an adventure; living that love working for justice is an adventure, living that love fostering peace and reconciliation is an adventure; living that love offering come and see good news in a distracted world is an adventure; doing the inner soul work of following Jesus is an adventure. Church – adventure it.

To you who are being recognized, commissioned, and ordained today, you are helping lead us in this adventure, and that leadership is not just a job, it is an adventure - adventure it by the grace of God and in the power of God's Spirit. Hear God saying again and again and again, "give me your hand." Know that you are surrounded by others on this same leadership adventure that are also offering their hands along the way. It's not just a job, its and adventure, and thanks be to God for that. Amen.