The Ordination of Leslie A. Stewart to the Priesthood

May 9, 2015

The Rev. Catherine M. Thompson

John 10:11-18

Come, Holy Spirit, come. Bless us with your presence as we draw closer to you. Amen.

- We just heard the words of Jesus, as recorded in John’s gospel, chapter 10, “So there will be one flock, one shepherd.”

- I don’t know how many of you have become the repository for family Bibles and prayer books, but I certainly have.

- And, on the cover of one belonging to my father as a boy, there is an iconic image of Jesus standing over a flock of sheep, grazing, as he lovingly looks over them.

- The cover is bright blue, so it captures your attention regardless of where it sits in the room.

- Because of this particular Bible’s history, and the owners who cared for it before it entered into my hands, I cannot help but recall this image - as simplistic and childlike as it may be - each time I hear this passage.

- There is much to be said for seeking Jesus in a childlike way: to be our shepherd, our pastor; to seek the protection he offers; to seek his care in times of distress; to luxuriate in the freedom of following him knowing with all certainty that he will not lead you astray.

- If we contrast that with the lifetime of experiences we’ve had since then, with the ups and downs through which we’ve lived, it seems as though that childlike way might be preferable to anything the world has to offer.

- It seems a much simpler way to live.

- But, there is that rare breed of people that seem to want to go into the fray, want to be with the lost and the lonely, and do not mind the chaos as much as they should.

- For some who have heard our Good Shepherd’s voice, and who know that peace deep within the core of our being - we do what seems right and good, and answer the call of Jesus.

- Throughout the ages, ever since Moses called the first elders to his side, one question has been asked, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?”

- And, every so often, a Christian man or woman, a member of Christ’s own flock, hear that question in a unique way.

- “Will you, Leslie, help me find the sheep that do not belong to this fold? Will you help them to hear my voice?”

- For those of you who have not heard a call on your life - whether it is to the ordained ministry or not - I can assure you that it can shake you to your core.

- Isaiah heard the call in the midst of a vision of heaven itself.

- He saw God embodied and seated on a throne.

- And, while in God’s presence, he became aware of his own sinfulness.

- He felt his own inadequacies, and was concerned that he was not equipped to do what God was asking him to do.

- He confessed as much, received forgiveness, and was purified with a live coal, a symbol of the justice and mercy of God.

- It was only then that he could say, “Here am I; send me.”

- In some ways, we may feel as though we are gathered here this morning to celebrate the end of a long journey for Leslie - and it has been a long journey.

- Every person in this room has walked some part of that journey with you, and has supported you along the way.

- It feels as though we need to pause and take a deep breath because somehow the journey has ended.

- But, in essence, the truth is - it has only just begun.

- As Leslie knows from her own life experience, the hours and hours spent on the ground and in the air training to be a pilot were only the beginning.

- From the moment the wheels of her plane lifted off the runway during her first solo flight until the day she hung up her flight suit for a different kind of adventure, she continued to grow into the leader she was trained to be.

- As God said to Jeremiah when he was called to be a prophet to the people, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you.”

- The good shepherd knew you, and you knew the good shepherd.

- God knew all of the gifts and skills you would need to help find those sheep that do not yet belong to the fold.

- And saw to it that you would be trained not only to hear the shepherd’s voice, but also to lead others to do the same.

- This is what Jesus means when he says, “I know my own.”

- There is no one who knows us better or loves us more than our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

- At times, we may feel quite unlovable, unworthy, or unqualified for the task at hand - as if we haven’t prepared enough for the test.

- But the Good Shepherd gave his life for the sheep so that we might experience new life, so that we can move beyond our insecurities to see how we might play a part in God’s divine plan.

- God loves us, unconditionally, right where we are - wherever that might be.

- And, God has placed people in our lives to remind us of that truth on a regular basis.

- You can all name them for yourselves - relatives, teachers, mentors and friends.

- God surrounded Leslie with loving, caring people who took the time to share the Gospel message with her - to tell her she was loved, and to reassure her that God had a plan, even when she couldn’t see it.

- They were there to remind her that she is worthy, and that she is qualified to answer the call.

- I give thanks to those countless saints who have given you that message, Leslie.

- I give thanks to those Christians throughout the centuries who have reminded us all to have that childlike faith in Jesus - to remember who we are and whose we are.

- Because the Good Shepherd knows his own.

- But, the words of Jesus do not stop there.

- Some days I think, “If only they would!”

- No, Jesus goes on to say not only that he knows his own, but that “my own know me.”

- And, here is where our mutual ministry really begins.

- It does not take an expert in the field to recognize that there are many different and varied voices competing for our attention these days.

- Life isn’t as quiet as it once was, and with the gift of technology, comes a challenge - to hear and discern the voice of Jesus in the midst of it all.

- It can be quite confusing and overwhelming at times.

- We can be led off course so easily - not necessarily in big, dramatic ways, but sometimes in small quiet ways.

- One of the most important tasks of an individual who has accepted the call of being a priest and pastor is to help everyone hear and discern the voice of Jesus - not just within these walls - but most especially beyond them.

- During the Examination, the Bishop will say that “As a priest, it will be your task to proclaim by word and deed the Gospel of Jesus Christ…to love and serve the people…to preach, to declare God’s forgiveness to penitent sinners, to pronounce God’s blessing…and to share in the administration of Holy Baptism and in the celebration of the mysteries of Christ’s Body and Blood, and to perform the other ministrations entrusted to you.”

- While it sounds like a long and daunting list of things to do - and at times it can certainly feel that way - it’s important to remember that it all boils down to one thing - helping others to recognize the voice of Jesus.

- Whether the sound of his voice comes through Scripture, through Sacrament, through Service or through your Support, it is your calling to help others hear it and know it to be true in the depths of their soul.

- From the first encounter with our Greeters where someone new to our congregation can feel with the love of Christ in a tangible way, through his or her baptism into the family of God, you can welcome those lost sheep and give them a place to belong.

- And, once they have that sense of belonging, you can walk with them, as someone once walked with you through those deeper questions of faith.

- You can be there for those sacramental moments that mark the movement of the Holy Spirit in and through the lives of your people.

- It is in those sacred moments that you as a pastor can help feed those who hunger for Christ.

- It is there in those sacred moments that you will remember why you are here today.

- It is there in those sacred moments that a community of faith will grow.

- So that when we leave this holy space, there can be no doubt that our Good Shepherd is with us.

- Jesus says, “There will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again.”

- Leslie, as you move into this new phase of your journey with Christ, I want to take this opportunity to remind you, and to remind all of us here with you, that there is a reason Jesus says there is only one flock and one shepherd.

- Jesus gave his life for the flock so that you don’t have to.

- While you are called to be a pastor among the people of God, you are not the good shepherd.

- Only Jesus can fill that role.

- While you would willingly give everything to further God’s kingdom here on earth, God is not asking you to sacrifice your life.

- Your role is not to be the Good Shepherd, but to lead others to the Good Shepherd.

- It is also good to remember that you are never, ever alone.

- While you have been called to ministry that at times can be lonely, you are never alone.

- You have a community of faith - brothers and sisters in Christ - ready and willing to serve if only given the chance.

- It is a gift and an honor to be able to serve alongside another, to help him find his ministry among the people of God, and to set him on the path of leadership in his own right.

- But, that cannot and will not happen unless you see the potential God has placed within them, in the same way that someone once saw the potential in you.

- One of my favorite phrases from Eucharistic Prayer D is this: “When our disobedience took us far from you, you did not abandon us to the power of death. In your mercy you came to our help, so that in seeking you we might find you.”

- Do not forget that childlike yearning that draws you into the heart of God because it is in seeking the face of God that you will find it.

And, now, Leslie, I ask you to stand for your charge.

Every time you see a beautiful shade of blue,

 I ask you to remember your childlike faith in Jesus.

Remember his love and care

 that brought you this far.

Seek his care in times of distress.

 He will be your greatest source of strength and comfort.

Honor your family’s need for your time and presence;

 because they are gifts from God to you, and should be valued as such.

Approach the throne of God with humility;

 because there will always be room to grow.

Hold on to your sense of awe as you approach the altar;

 because it will inspire others to do the same.

Proclaim the Good News with passion.

 It is the best gift you can give to a world in need.

Love the people of God with all your heart,

 and tell them of God’s love again and again.

Serve others with joy no matter how small the task;

 because sometimes actions speak louder than words.

Pray without ceasing;

 because you know that in seeking you will find.

Laugh as often as possible,

 but don’t be afraid to cry.

Be strong and wise,

 Yet tender and caring.

Rejoice in the Lord always,

 and the God of peace will be with you.