

August 1, 2021 – Ephesians 4:1-16

July 12<sup>th</sup> marked the 12<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my ordination into the pastoral ministry. And while that morning was a flurry of activity and anticipation, I do still remember much of it quite well. Processing up the aisle with the other pastors. The sanctuary draped in red. Sitting in the chair, placed before the chancel, every eye in the congregation upon me.

And then I distinctly remember having a rather bizarre thought: “Am I allowed to be ordained?” You see, as much as we’d like to think of the spiritual depth and holiness that covers the ordination of a new pastor, the truth is that becoming a pastor in the LCMS involves a lot of... well... paperwork.

It all starts with the call, of course, which I had received in April of that year. But then there was the letter of intent to accept the call. Then the request to graduate. Then the theological diploma. Then the academic diploma. Then the letter of seminary certification. Then the letter of acceptance of the call. Then the request to be rostered. And then FINALLY, at the end of all of that, was the request for ordination.

Now, I had sent in this particular form at the beginning of June, but it occurred to me at that very moment, dressed in my alb, sitting before God and the entire congregation, that I had not actually received written approval to be ordained. So I sat there, dwelling over this dilemma in my mind, coming to the same conclusion over and over again: there is absolutely no way that I am saying anything about it right now. Let’s just get through this service, and I’ll deal with the consequences later.

As it turned out, there weren’t any consequences and my worry was needless. The approval for ordination had, in fact, arrived, but it had been sent directly to the pastor ordaining me. So it was with great relief that I received this certificate during the luncheon that followed the ordination, affirming that I had been ordained in the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. I was fully legal.

But the whole experience has always made me wonder: Does it really need to be this hard? Do we really need 50 pages of forms and two and a half months of jumping through hoops just so that I can stand up here and preach God’s Word to you?

Looking at the descriptions from scripture, you might say “no.” Choosing apostles and deacons was a matter of casting lots and voting. Ordaining a new pastor for a church consisted of picking out the man with the most knowledge of God’s Word and the best character, and laying your hands on him in prayer. The whole process sounds like it could be done in a day, not 10 weeks.

And yet, as much as I’d like to think that such a relaxed, bureaucracy-free method would work in the church today, deep down I know that it wouldn’t. The church is much larger and more fragmented than it once was. We’re sinful human beings, after all. The strong, central leadership of a handful of apostles has given way to centuries of infighting and the need for a very intentional structure. And for all its faults, the LCMS’s methods do a decent job of keeping us in one piece.

Oh, you might not think that from looking at us. Churches do split and there are arguments. On the other hand, I think there are some people who just like to argue. Once upon a time, just about every pastor in the Missouri Synod received a newsletter. A newsletter which mostly served as place for pastors to vent. To complain about whatever it was that they feel was wrong with the LCMS.

Today, such newsletters have been largely replaced by social media. By Facebook groups and Twitter rants and personal blogs. Places where LCMS pastors and clergy can air the synod's dirty laundry on an even more public scale. But even looking at these articles, I think you can see that the things we fight about aren’t all that extreme.

They're nothing, honestly, compared to the differences we have with some others who claim the name of Christian. Or even the name of Lutheran. People who disagree with us on such basic things as who Christ was, what he accomplished on the cross, and whether or not we can even trust what scripture says about him.

Truth be told, we in the LCMS argue an awful lot, but that's OK, as long as we cling to those things that are at the core of our faith. The things that Paul talks about in our Epistle today: one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all.

One body of Christ, bound together in Holy Communion. One Spirit, that moves us to act for the good of the kingdom. One hope in the resurrection of the dead. One Lord who came as a human and died for each of us. One faith that he is coming again. One baptism, like the one little Joseph received this morning, washing away our sins and giving us new life. One God and Father of us all who created us, loves us, and wants all to know the saving grace of his Son.

That is unity. That is at the core of the church. And it's a unity that we proclaim every Sunday, as we say together the words of the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds. You see, that's what creeds were meant to do. They distill everything that we believe as a church into a single compact statement.

A way of saying, "This is our starting point. No matter what else we say, no matter what else we may argue about, we all agree on these points. Everything we say and do, everything we read, everything that we think will be filtered through these articles of the faith."

The creeds are powerful documents, because every time we read them together as a congregation, we are declaring to each other and to the world, "These men and women are my brothers and sisters in Christ. I believe these things, but I say them now with everyone around me because we believe these things. Together."

The creeds are a declaration we have been united by more than church affiliation or organization membership. We have been united in the blood of Christ. We have been made one body brought together by one Spirit in water and the Word. And it is in this Spirit that we go forth to carry out God's calling.

What is that calling? Well, it's the calling of every single one of God's people. A calling to reach out in love to our neighbors. A calling to look past our own pride, our own ambition, our own desires, and find those ways that we might be an active part of God's Kingdom.

And it is a scary thing to do. Absolutely. Because when you take up that calling, you take up your cross and follow Christ. But we have a God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. And he has apportioned grace to each one of us.

Grace to step out in faith. Grace to take a leap when the path is unclear. Grace to forgive us when we doubt. And grace to teach us forgiveness for enemies of the church that we are called to love. The Father's grace surrounds all that we do, and by His grace we shall see His victory.

One of my favorite authors is a woman named Flannery O'Connor. She was a well respected writer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century who wasn't afraid to let her faith shine through. And she once wrote a novel called *Wise Blood*.

It was about a man who was destined to be a pastor. He was the grandson of a pastor. He spent his entire childhood with people telling him he would be a pastor. But when he grew up, he decided he didn't want to be a pastor. In fact, he wanted nothing to do with God at all.

And like Jonah, he ran from God his entire life. He nearly got himself killed in World War II. He committed crimes. He endured poverty and sickness. He publicly blasphemed God at every opportunity. He was determined to fight this destiny.

And after all of that. After all that suffering. After all that he had said and done, his entire life boiled down to one act: sharing God's love with a bitter old woman who had lost her faith. In the end, he became a pastor after all. A pastor to just one person. But that was God's plan all along.

God has a calling for each one of us. We can fight it, argue about it, make life hard for ourselves and our church. Or we can embrace it. Be excited about it. Be united as one body through it. His plan will be done either way. Amen.