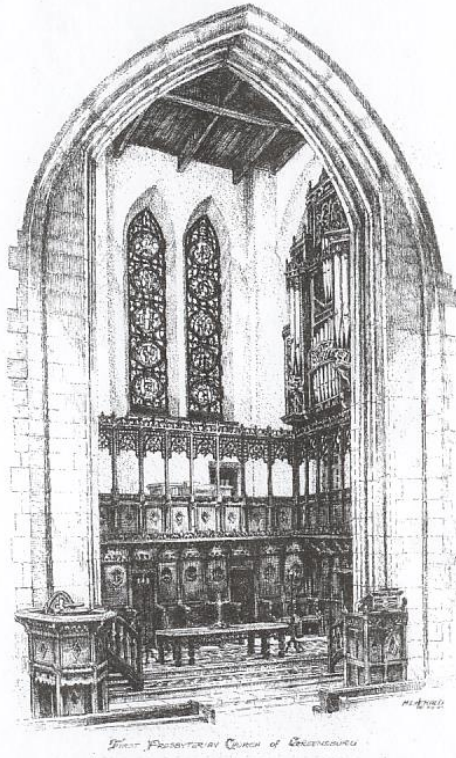


A Shared Calling

Psalm 14 & 1 Timothy 6:11-19

Pentecost 10 - July 28, 2024

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Thomas G. Long, my old preaching prof at Princeton Seminary is convinced that this passage that ends the First Epistle to Timothy is specifically about ordination. Perhaps he is right, but I think that what is written here is beneficial to all of us who have heard the good news of the Gospel.

All human life is summoned in the wake of God's good work in Jesus Christ to be about the work of God in this world. We are all called to respond with our hearts, minds and lives with gratitude and joyful service of one another in this world. All of this to be done in imitation of Jesus Christ and Christ's message of God's love for humankind and his command that we ought to rejoice in the day that we have been given.

Though ordination may be at the heart of the passage for today, it all begins with baptism, doesn't it? Today, we have been privileged to be present at the baptism of little Caroline Elizabeth. The scene is familiar to us as the people of God: a child is presented by somewhat anxious though thoroughly happy parents, the aged pastor takes the young life in his hands, offers the old prayers, the old words of scripture, the new name is pronounced, water is poured and applied to the infant's head and new life in Christ begins. The rather awesome, profound, and somewhat off-putting words are rehearsed again in the Thanksgiving over the Water:

May *Caroline Elizabeth* who now passes through these waters be delivered from death to life, from bondage to freedom, from sin to righteousness. Bind *her* to the household of faith, guard *her* from all evil. Strengthen *her* to serve you with joy until the day you make all things new.

For most of us here this day, this is a shared experience. We have been baptized and we have been joyously welcomed into the people of God. Most of us were baptized at a time in our life when we had no choice; this decision was made for us by loving and caring parents who knew that this was absolutely the best way to express the joy of new life and the presence of Jesus Christ in their own lives. We grow into this baptism that we have received and this is truly at the heart of our shared calling.

Baptism does not assure the parents or the recipient that this child will be a perfect example of both humanity and of God's love and grace. Parents do not perceive a discernable difference after the sacrament has been administered – infants still cry out in the middle of the night, need to be fed, changed, bathed, and constantly watched over. Our baptized children do not become perfect examples of God's great creation, but they are still, of course, perfectly adorable.

In a similar way, our baptism into God's people does not make any of us perfect and complete witnesses to God's love and mercy. We, who have this shared calling and promise in our baptism, are still people who have all kinds of wonderful moments and some pretty dreary habits that bespot humankind and mark us as fallible, broken, and always in need of redemption.

Tom Long makes this point, albeit about ordination, I think it still holds true for all of us with this shared calling:

The irony of ordination is that one kneels for the laying on of hands, and the person who kneels is a person who bears all the bruises and flaws of everyone else, the same shortness of temper, the same tendency toward cynicism, the same proneness to lose heart. And then, when the laying on of hands happens and the prayer is prayed, that person stands – still the same, but unmistakably different, too. There are still the same bent places in one’s personality and moral life, one’s tennis backhand is still lousy, but there is an awareness that one has taken on a burden and a new identity. From now on, this person has the responsibility to body forth God into the world ...

Is indeed true about those who are ordained, whether it be deacon, elder or Minister of Word and Sacrament, but it is just as true about any of us who have been baptized. We are all called, in the midst of our frailties, failures, and human wonders to, as Long so poignantly puts it, ‘body forth God into the world.’ We all have the shared calling of actually embodying the grace, love, and mercy of God in our lives out in the world. We all share this calling from freshly baptized Caroline Elizabeth to the oldest in our midst. We are called to be the hands and feet of God as we share the very heart of God with our neighbors and fellow humanity.

Martin Copenhaver, a UCC minister of note, once wrote of something incredibly important to remember about this calling. Again, like Tom Long, couches it in reference to his own ordination, but I think it applies to our shared calling as well:

Before I closed my eyes for the prayer, I took a glance around me to see who was standing immediately behind me. But once my eyes were closed, in most instances I couldn’t tell whose hands I was feeling on my head or my back. I thought, ‘...the hand that is shaking: whose is that? And that hand on my head that feels particularly heavy, is that my father’s? Or on second thought, is that Jesus’ hand? After all his presence has been invoked several times in the service already. About time he showed up.

Copenhaver has it exactly right: it would ludicrous to think that any of us, frail and fallible human beings, could embody the love and grace of God out in this world without the assuring and assisting presence of Jesus Christ in our lives. We have this shared calling that comes from our baptism, but it a calling that not only we share with each other, we also share the living presence of Jesus Christ as we go out from this place into the world. Without such a presence, we are nothing but well-intentioned folks who fumble our ways through our witness of God’s love.

As Caroline Elizabeth grows into her baptism, let us remember that we too are still growing into our own. Let us all remember that we have been baptized, that we have received this calling to love the world for which Christ died and rose again, and let us leave from here assured that we go not alone, but we go together ... together with Christ’s very presence. May this be so for Caroline Elizabeth and for us all.