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“Married to the Church”

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22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)

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Psalm 45:1–2, 6–9; James 1:17–27; Mark 7:1–8, 14–15, 21–23

In January 1996, my husband and I stood before our congregation
in West Virginia to take the same ordination vows that some of you
will be taking this morning as ruling elders and deacons of the church.

Parity, we call it in Presbyterian polity,
when teaching elders like myself, and ruling elders and deacons
are equal in our *set apart* status before God,
differing only in the nature of the tasks
for which we have been set apart for service.

My husband and I were ordained and installed together as a clergy couple
before our new Presbytery, before our new congregation,
and before our three young children, who sat wide eyed in the first pew.

After each ordination vow was read, we replied,
“I do,” or “I will,” or “I will, with God’s help.”

And then we faced the congregation and knelt,
which is always most humbling, and makes you painfully aware of
every second of time you are bowed low
while those previously ordained came forward to lay on hands
for the prayer of ordination.

Frankly, I wonder if we should kneel more often in worship and not less;

I wonder if we've lost something spiritually profound
in acquiescing to physical comfort.
Nevertheless, back to 1996, in that state of painful awareness,
and piqued mindfulness and sensitivity to the moment,
to the smokiness of the candles,
to the paradoxical weight and lightness
of each hand resting on my head or shoulders,
to the discomfort in my knees,
my ears detected our youngest child, our six year old, Stuart,
stage whisper to his siblings,
"I think Mom and Dad are getting married!"
And you know what? He was right. In a way, we were getting married to the church!

Psalm 45 is a wedding psalm
celebrating the marriage of a distinguished couple, most likely a royal couple.
It begins unusually for a psalm with an ascription from the composer
who aspires to capture a noble moment with his pen
with words well spoken to the groom.

Then the composer begins to describe the lavish scene unfolding before him:
a handsome king ennobled by military prowess
and wise leadership skills, God's anointed, decked out in fragrant
robes of myrrh, aloe, and cassia, surrounded by stringed musicians,
and oh, yes, beautiful women of high political standing,
one of whom will soon be his queen.

In the margin of my NIV study bible at home, I have written beside this psalm,
"You have arrived!" which is, perhaps, how the bridegroom feels at this moment.
And perhaps that is how some of us feel when we are ordained to office
in the church, like we have arrived.

*This is it! The apogee of our life in the church! The culmination of many hours
spent in study or preparation to serve! All eyes are upon us!*

We are the center of everyone's attention!

We have at this rare moment the favor of God and the favor of our community!

This is God's big "yes" on a life well-lived... isn't it?

It would be quite easy to become prideful at this point
amidst all the pomp and circumstance
to center our happiness in *our* accomplishments.
to ascertain our worth by the measure of *our* work,
to believe that we have arrived at fulfillment by *our own efforts*,
if it weren't for that uncomfortable kneeling position.

What are occasions when one would kneel, I wondered, as I worked on this sermon?

Sometimes I used to kneel when I would say my prayers at night as a child:

"Now I lay me down to sleep; I pray thee Lord my soul to keep."

When I attended the Muslim break-the-fast service during Ramadan,
I noticed that the Muslims knelt frequently during their prayers,
standing shoulder to shoulder, neighbor to neighbor,
before bowing to kneel and touch their foreheads to the floor.

When we used to worship with St. Joseph's AME for Maundy Thursday,
we would kneel at the communion rail where we came
to cup our hands and receive Christ, the Bread of Life.

Usually I kneel when I am gardening, to dig, to weed, to plant, to try and grow
something beautiful for God.

My husband and I knelt for our wedding prayer
on a kneeling bench that my mother had needle-pointed for the church
just for that occasion.

She stitched her initials on the back and the date she made it *for the church*.

And when I asked her why she didn't include our names in the inscription,
since we were the first couple to use it, she quipped,

"Because it's not all about you!"

Our kneeling is in recognition that it's not all about us; it's about God

who has gifted us for the office to which we are called, ordained or installed,
and who has brought us to just such a needful time and place as this.

All of our texts this morning convey practical wisdom
about the manner in which the Christian life is to be lived
if one desires to serve the Lord with integrity and wholeness.

The wedding Psalm 45 recognizes the ruler as one who not only believes
and speaks eloquently with lips that have been anointed with grace,
but who *practices* what he or she believes and speaks,
guaranteeing and insisting on equity and righteousness
in the face of great hate and wickedness.

Think Charleston, here, my friends; think racial injustice and overreaches
by law enforcement; think voter equity; think food security for hungry children;
think affordable housing; think improved public education;
think immigration and the influx of displaced people; think gun violence;
think of things that make for peace and the common good.

For us as Christians, the one anointed with the oil of gladness
is the one anointed into the ministry of Jesus,
who used his glad power of anointing to love his neighbor
and to work for the wellbeing of all, not just for some.

The passage from James begins with the beautiful assertion,
"Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father
of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows."
(James 1:17)

Like the petitioner kneeling at the communion rail with hands cupped,
our primary act of leadership is one of *receiving* from above the gift of Christ
before we can ever hope to give or share or organize or envision or lead.

Welsh poet and priest R.S. Thomas wrote a beautiful poem called *Kneeling*,
that goes like this:

Kneeling

Moments of great calm,
Kneeling before an altar
Of wood in a stone church
In summer, waiting for the God
To speak; the air a staircase
For silence; the sun's light
Ringing me, as though I acted
A great rôle. And the audiences
Still; all that close throng
of spirits waiting, as I,
For the message.
Prompt me, God;
But not yet. When I speak,
Though it be you who speak
Through me, something is lost.
The meaning is in the waiting.

James advocates for waiting as we listen more, talk less, especially if anger is a factor,
listening more for God, as the poet suggests, and also listening to others.

It brings to mind for me the bumper sticker that I see sometimes around town:

"Bark less, wag more!"

But for James, even listening is secondary to doing

when it comes to living out one's faith.

James insists that we be "doers of the word" and not merely hearers.

Drawing upon the wisdom and intent of the Hebrew verb, *shema*,
which means to both to listen and to act,

James encourages the Christian community to practice faith
in looking after the orphans and widows, or in our time,
the disinherited, the powerless, the helpless, and the marginalized,

if we want to consider ourselves practitioners of anything God would even regard as religious.

In the Gospel lesson, Jesus gets into another tiff with the Pharisees over what makes a person clean or unclean.

And Jesus calls out “the self-righteous” on their hypocrisy, noting that traditions can become idolatrous if out of touch with intent of the Word of God.

“Nothing outside of a person can make that person unclean,” Jesus notes, “only what comes out of a person *can* make that person unclean.” (Mark 7:15–16)

During our church’s Summer Service activities, I spent one morning with Wendy McCorkle and Marie Sappenfield and other community volunteers at the Durham Food Bank on Angier Avenue.

We participated in what they called “salvage,” which means going through cans and boxes of damaged donated goods to see what is salvageable for people to eat and what needs to be tossed into the box designated “pig slop,” as nothing will be wasted.

When I came home from the food bank that day,

I had the sticky brown juice from damaged cans of pork and beans all over my shirt and pants, as well as other bits and kibbles.

But I doubt if Jesus would call that activity “unclean,” although we certainly got our hands dirty that day inspecting, sorting, taping, and tossing broken packages and cans.

As newly ordained and installed officers of the church, I hope that you’ll deal in the unclean regularly and often without giving it a second thought.

But I pray you won’t let unclean thoughts or words come out of you.

I hope you’ll learn to temper that impulse, and bark less, wag more.

Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, draws a wider circle to include not only the ordained and installed, but all of us baptized

into the life and ministry of Jesus.

He says, "Baptism does not confer on us a status that marks us off from everybody else.

To be able to say, 'I'm baptized' is not to claim an extra dignity, let alone a sort of privilege that keeps you separate from and superior to the human race, but to claim a new level of solidarity with other people.

It is to accept that to be a Christian is to be affected—you might even say *contaminated*—by the mess of humanity.

This is very paradoxical," he notes. "Baptism is a ceremony in which we are washed, cleansed and recreated.

It is also a ceremony in which we are pushed into the middle of a human situation that may hurt us, and that will not leave us untouched or unsullied.

And the gathering of baptized people is therefore not a convocation of those who are privileged, elite and separate, but of those who have accepted what it means to be in the heart of a needy, contaminated, messy world.

To put it another way, you don't go down into the waters of the Jordan without stirring up a great deal of mud," Williams says.

(Rowan Williams. *Being Christian*, pp. 5–6)

Or to use another kneeling image,

we don't kneel down to weed and work the trowel to grow something beautiful in our garden for God

without rising up with dirty knees and grit embedded under our fingernails.

It just comes with the territory of stooping to tend, to grow, to nurture, to care, to envision something better and something beautiful, and to manifest the righteous life and the kingdom life that God desires.

David Brooks, in his new book, *The Road to Character*, brings up a paradox he calls "humble ambition," in speaking of the theologian Augustine.

According to Augustinian thought, Brooks notes, honest introspection

“leads to a humility as one feels small in contrast to the almighty.
That leads to a posture of surrender, of self-emptying, as one makes space for God.
That opens the way for you to receive God’s grace.
That gift arouses an immense felling of gratitude, a desire to love back, to give back,
and to delight... that in turn awakens vast energies.”

(David Brooks, *The Road to Character*, p. 208)

Sounds a little like a marriage, to me: surrender, a desire to love back
and to give back, and to delight, an awakening of vast energies.

Personally, I find it a great privilege to be married to the church.

For to be married to the church is to kneel in *humble ambition*
to the loving ministry of Jesus in a needy, contaminated, messy world. Amen.