

Ordination service

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Preacher: Dr. Jeff Bailey

[0 : 00] Thank you, you may be seated. Well, what a joy this is.

! This is something that we have all been looking forward to for a long time. And it is a joy for this day to have arrived where we can come and celebrate together Hillary's ordination to the priesthood.

And I would like for us to reflect just a little bit this evening on another different kind of ordination, which is the ordination, we might call it, of Peter, the Apostle Peter.

And if we were to ask, when was Peter's ordination to ministry, most of us would probably say it was following Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ, as the Messiah.

And Jesus responds to Peter that on him and on his confession, this is the rock on which Jesus will build his church and the gates of hell will not stand against it.

[1 : 09] And I would say as far as ordination sermons go, it is hard to top that one. We might wonder, what was going through Peter's mind when he heard this?

Because we all know that when we begin to discern Jesus' call in our lives, we naturally begin to think and dream about the kind of impact that we might have.

What was going through Peter's mind when he heard that kind of comment from Jesus about the kind of impact? That he might have. But we naturally do that when we reflect on what God is calling any of us to.

I am old enough to remember back in the day when I was a child, Billy Graham would preach crusades in cities and they would televise these at night in the evenings.

Each night of the crusade it would be on TV. And I don't know what this says about what kind of child I was, but I would watch those Billy Graham crusades every single night that they were on.

[2 : 17] And then we had a next door neighbor, an elderly lady, who would report to my mother that I would come to her backyard where she had a swing set and a slide.

And I would climb to the top of that slide, stand there, and I would preach a small sermon. And I would sing one stanza of Just As I Am.

I would invite people to come forward and give their lives to Jesus. And then she said, you could hear me say under my breath, hundreds are coming.

One of the joys of ordaining Hillary to the priesthood tonight is having been able to walk with her in her discernment journey over these last number of years. And what's true in Hillary's case is in fact true for every single one of us when we're discerning the things that God is calling us to.

And that is, it's important that we name the things, the dreams, the hopes that God has given us.

And at the same time, to remember that some of those dreams can be interwoven with incorrect or misplaced assumptions.

[3 : 38] Peter's confession that Jesus was the Christ, it was technically correct. But we also know that at the same time, he failed to understand just what kind of Messiah Jesus was going to be.

Failed to understand that he was going to be a suffering Messiah, not a Davidic freedom fighter overthrowing the Roman authorities. That's what Peter thought. And our own lives are often that way.

We dream about the things that God is calling us to. We dream about the kind of impact that we're going to make, the things that we might accomplish. And if Peter's confession of Christ was our gospel reading this evening, we could talk about that.

We could talk about the big vision that God calls every single one of us into. Because that is part of the call. What Hillary is called to is something of massive cosmic importance.

What you are called to, what I am called to, it is of massive cosmic importance. However, that's not this evening's text.

[4 : 51] In this evening's gospel, another side of ministry is presented to Peter. So in John 21, what we just heard read, having just miraculously hauled in 153 fish into the boat, the disciples are hungry, they're tired, they've come onto the beach to have breakfast with a resurrected Jesus, and just as they're finishing, Jesus pulls Peter off to one side to have a private conversation.

And there Jesus asks Peter, right from the start, what appears to be a really odd question. Jesus says, Peter, do you love me more than these?

And most commentators agree that Jesus was probably gesturing to the other disciples and saying, Peter, do you love me more than these?

More than these other disciples? And most of us would ask, why in the world does Jesus begin this kind of conversation with this sort of question? And one obvious answer to that is that Jesus is testing Peter because in the past, Peter was always setting himself up just above the other disciples when comparing their personal loyalty to Jesus.

So if you remember, in Matthew 26, Peter says to Jesus, even if all these other disciples abandon you, I will never do this.

[6 : 32] Or in John 13, Peter says, Lord, why can't I follow you right now? I am ready to lay down my life for you. Throughout the Gospels, Peter has a very high opinion of his own capacity.

Of his own strength. Of his own exceptional loyalty to Jesus. And so Jesus begins this conversation with Peter on the beach, the resurrected Jesus, by going back to what had been a major issue in Peter's life.

An area of weakness, which was his self-reliance. His ambition, his having to be just a bit better than everybody else. And so Peter, he says, where are we at?

Do you love me more than the others? And the old Peter, the Peter that we know, would have leaped at the chance to answer this question.

To remind Jesus of just how much he loved him more than the other disciples. But notice, throughout this entire conversation, Peter ignores Jesus' invitation to compare himself.

[7 : 47] His responses make no reference to the other disciples, even though that's how Jesus phrased the question. Instead, Peter simply says, Lord, you know that I love you.

Comparisons are gone. At the same time, he doesn't offer false humility. He doesn't say, Lord, I obviously don't love you as much as the other disciples do.

He just answers with honesty and simplicity. No pretension. And he answers, interestingly, in exactly the same way.

He's so careful and so repetitive, they suggest a person who no longer trusts his old instincts. And Jesus responds by saying, feed my lambs.

Care for my people. Jesus does not say, preach to thousands, Peter, and win the Mediterranean world for me.

[8 : 50] Even though that is exactly what will happen. Jesus is the one who only moments earlier had told the disciples had been fishing all morning.

They had caught nothing. He says, let down your nets on the other side. And the nets were flooded with 153 fish. Which is the text's way of saying this was an immense, incredible, unprecedented number of fish.

And the text says this, I think, because Jesus knows that gathering big numbers, whether fish or people, is never the biggest challenge.

Jesus wants something different from Peter. And so he gives Peter someone with massive leadership gifts, incredible abilities, a very streamlined work assignment.

He says, Peter, feed my sheep. Care for the people right there in front of you. And then as if this shrinking of Peter's ministry is not enough, Jesus doubles down.

[9 : 53] He narrows Peter's call. And then he narrates a vision of ministry in which Peter is no longer in control. Truly, truly, I say to you, Jesus said to Peter, when you were a young man, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted.

But when you are older, you will stretch out your hands. And another will dress you and take you where you do not want to go. Now, interestingly, John has a little aside here.

He says Jesus was talking about Peter's future martyrdom. But there's no indication Jesus says this to Peter. All we see here is Peter hearing Jesus say, Peter, you used to be in control and now you will not be.

Why is Jesus saying this to Peter? It would appear that the ministry to which Jesus first commissioned him in such a dramatic fashion on this rock, I will build my church. It would appear that the actual fulfillment of that ministry will require something different, something more than Peter's natural abilities alone. It will require Peter to have a kind of passivity, a kind of willingness to not be in control.

[11:18] Years ago, I had a spiritual director. He once said to me just in passing, but I always remembered it. He said, always actively surrender and then passively follow.

Actively surrender and then passively follow. And I think in this passage here, Jesus is saying something similar.

He's saying, Peter, all that energy that in the past used to express itself in ambition and in self-promotion, channel that into active surrender.

Channel it into taking care of those that I will give you. And then from that place of surrender, you will be newly available for the kind of ministry that I have for you, which will require you to go to places that you would not have chosen.

Gregory of Nazianzus, one of the church fathers writing in the fourth century, wrote that the way to prepare for pastoral ministry is to follow what he called the order of the Spirit.

[12:27] He wrote that we must first surrender to the Spirit and allow ourselves to be transformed in order to communicate grace to others. Only those who are in a position to cleanse others.

He wrote. And here on the beach, in what is effectively a kind of second ordination service, Jesus invites Peter into a deeper purification that will enable him to communicate God's grace to others. Now, here's the question. What is it that makes it possible for Peter to actually hear this from Jesus, to receive it?

We might remember that a posture of humility, of receptivity, was not something that Peter was known for. Or we might remember that Jesus attempted to evoke that in Peter in the past, especially when he tried to wash Peter's feet, and Peter would have none of it.

But here in the meekness of Peter's response to Jesus, we catch a glimpse of something new. We see a Peter who is newly able to receive this commission to go wherever he is led.

[13:46] And we have to ask, what explains this new malleability? And I think there can be no question that Peter's preparation for this reordination to ministry results from his earlier failures, from his earlier sense of loss.

It's interesting. The early church considered that the story of Peter's denial of Christ was one of the most important things, of central importance. The church fathers talk about it all the time.

All four gospel writers are very careful to recount specifically what happened in Peter's denial of Christ. And scholars will say, scholars of antiquity will say that there is nothing quite like the story of Peter's denial of Christ in all of the literature of antiquity in terms of its immediacy and its detail. It stands apart. And one of the most striking details from that story is Peter's reaction to his loss and failure, the impact that it made on him.

Matthew and Luke's gospel tell us that after hearing the rooster crow three times, this larger-than-life fisherman went outside and what? He wept bitterly.

[15:02] And it doesn't take a huge amount of imagination to suggest that the depth of Peter's brokenness results at least in part from the huge amount of confidence that he had had in his personal loyalty to Jesus.

Peter considered himself ready to die for Jesus. This was a big part of his own self-conception. And so perhaps part of what we see in Peter's tears is an unraveling of the way that he understood himself and saw himself and saw what his future might look like.

The reality is that we all have things that we believe to be true about ourselves, that we believe to be true about our future. And sometimes, as in the case of Peter, when those futures don't come about or when those things that we believe to be true about ourselves turn out to not be so true, the realization can be sudden and dramatic.

For most of us, however, it is more slow and drawn out. Sometimes, as with Peter, the losses that we experience are due to things for which we are culpable.

It's our fault. Other times, however, those losses result from things that are completely outside of our control. Careers that don't go as expected.

[16:34] Relationships that fail. Doors that, for some reason, just don't seem to open. And it is instructive, I think, how Peter responded to this loss.

He didn't deny his role. He didn't pretend things weren't so bad. He owned the experience. He wept bitterly. What happened in a compressed way for Peter often takes more time for us.

But whether it happens quickly or takes years, the breaking of Peter that prepared him for a deeper call to ministry is what must happen to all of us as well.

Over several decades in the 20th century, one of the most remarkable longitudinal studies was done. It was called the Grant Study. And in it, nearly 300 male undergraduates at Harvard were selected from among their peers as the most likely to succeed.

And they were studied medically and psychologically. They were interviewed by a research team every single year for the rest of their lives. It was an amazing study, often talked about.

[17 : 56] Their identities were kept absolutely secret, but we have learned in more recent years that two of those, one was John F. Kennedy, and another was Ben Bradley, who became editor of the Washington Post.

And what is so interesting and even shocking from the results of the study is how the lives of these apparently well-adjusted young men play out in ways that defy predictability.

The trajectory at the beginning of a person's life is no predictor of where they eventually end up.

One especially gifted young man grew up with every advantage, and yet by his mid-30s, he was wandering through life, fell off the radar of the study, and died at a young age.

Another young man in the study was raised in a blue-collar home by abusive parents, yet he went on to become a national civil rights leader. He was loved by his co-workers. He lived well into old age, and he was celebrated in all the obituaries as a civil rights hero.

The primary author of the study writes that if there is one theme that emerges from the entire study, one lesson, it is this. The ultimate course of these men's lives had little to do with how many advantages or difficulties they started out with, but rather how they responded to failure and to loss that came along the way.

[19 : 32] He writes that this central theme is best captured in the story from a parable of a father who, in Christmas Eve, put into one of his son's stockings an expensive gold watch and into another son's stocking a pile of horse manure.

The next morning, the first boy comes to his father and says, Dad, I just don't know what I'll do with this watch. It's so fragile, it could break. And the other boy runs to him and says, Daddy, Daddy, Santa left me a pony, if only I can just find it.

How do we respond to disappointment and loss? In our gospel this evening, the Peter that we observe on the beach is different.

He's changed from the Peter that we encounter earlier in the gospels. Here at the end of John's gospel, we encounter a Peter who is becoming more humble and more malleable.

He has no idea of how God is going to use him. All he knows is that loss and failure and disappointment have prepared him to actively surrender and passively follow.

[20 : 52] This evening, we ordain Hillary to the priesthood. But as we pray for Hillary, let's also pray for ourselves.

Because our passage this evening reminds us that God is not looking for people who simply have gifts or talents or ambition.

The God who can bring 153 fish into a boat has no trouble accomplishing whatever he wants, whenever he wants. But God is looking for more Peters.

Women and men who will allow themselves to be transformed by failure and loss. So that God can use them to bring transformation to others.

Amen. Amen.