

The Rev. Canon Lydia Kelsey Bucklin
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St. Mark's Episcopal Cathedral,
Minneapolis, Minnesota

*In the name of the one who sustains, renews, and always pursues us.¹
Amen.*

Good evening. It is a joy, a real joy and privilege to stand with you all this evening for a beautiful celebration of gifts in the Episcopal Church in Minnesota.

I make my home on the sacred land of the Anishinaabe and on quiet days, I hope you all can hear me cheering loudly for you across Lake Superior, because you have been doing important, powerful, reconciling work over in your neck of the great north woods. And for that I give great thanks.

I have to tell you that when I was invited to preach this evening, your humble bishop didn't quite come clean with the whole shebang. You may have heard him refer to tonight as a liturgy-palooza, and that was all I got in terms of details when, of course I said yes, because I'd say yes to almost anything this great man asks me.

And if you know a bit about our theology and ecclesiology in the Diocese of Northern Michigan, which is the place where I was formed as a child and where I serve, it might give you a clue as to why your bishop downplayed the extravagance of this evening.

We don't tend to make a big deal about things like Bishop's being seated in Cathedrals in our diocese, and part of that might be because we don't even have a Cathedral!

But that isn't to say that these celebrations aren't important and powerful and meaningful in the life of the church. And I tend to find myself pretty often straddling the line of sacred and ordinary, small and large, scrappy and elegant quite often, so I actually feel very much at home among you all.

¹ As shared by Dr. Fredrica Harris Thompsett 2014, Episcopal Divinity School Preaching for Liberation Course.

One thing those of us in Northern Michigan *do* know how to do well, is to celebrate the ministry of folks. So thank you again, for the invitation.

I have been thinking a lot these days about wilderness. And I've been wondering if that wilderness that John the Baptist embraced... That wilderness where he made his home might not look similar to the wilderness we find ourselves in these days.

Many of you in Minnesota know a thing or two about wilderness, even you city dwellers.

In the Wilderness Act of 1964, our US government defines wilderness as "an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain."²

"Man himself (or woman herself, or person themselves) is a visitor, who does not remain."

Upon signing the Act, President Lyndon B. Johnson stated: "If future generations are to remember us with gratitude rather than contempt, we must leave them a glimpse of the world as it was in the beginning, not just after we got through with it."

Hmmm. Let's think about that in terms of our Church.

"If future generations are to remember us with gratitude rather than contempt, we must leave them a glimpse... as it was in the beginning, not just after we got through with it."

Have you ever wondered what sent John out into the wilderness? Maybe he was seeking a return to the way it was in the beginning. Before those religious types went and made a big mess out of things.

And there. in the midst of the wilderness, where land is untrammled, where we are invited to tread lightly and open ourselves to the wonder of creation, is where those early followers discovered baptism.

Baptism, this radical act of acceptance. An acceptance that we have always been and we will always be God's own, just as every creature,

² <https://www.justice.gov/enrd/wilderness-act-1964>

every living thing is of God. And baptism immerses us into a life of learning how all of that is true.

Each of us serving as midwives of the holy that is *already* present, trusting in the creative and redeeming power of the collaborative process that is life in community, charged by the living presence of the Spirit.³

As we gather today for this celebration, the seating of your bishop and the commissioning of these amazing folks for ministry, it is important to remind ourselves that all members of this community of the Episcopal Church in Minnesota, and really all of us as the Body of Christ, are interrelated and we are all needed. Each of us, having gifts that God is pleading with us to use out in the world.

Yes, ordained ministers are important. They model for us those diaconal, priestly, and apostolic traits that we all carry. They remind us of the divine initiative, our dependence on Jesus Christ, who is the source of the Church's mission and the foundation of its unity.

And on the other hand, ordained ministry has no existence apart from community. It is community that supports and encourages those who are commissioned for ministry. And it is the baptized who consistently model for us their own ministry in daily life in ways that renew and inspire the mission of the Church.

To “do church” in a mutual, baptismal way, means to look to the places where the gifts and opportunities of its members meet the mission context in which it exists, meaning out in the world, beyond these walls, out in our local communities, in our neighborhoods and in our parks and in the places where people are already gathering.

It means no longer squeezing our members and structures into some false ideal model of “The Exceptional Episcopal Parish.”

I need to be honest with you. I don't mean to freak you out... You may or may not have noticed, but our church institution is dying.

If we mapped out the amount of time and energy the entire church has spent living and working purely for our own survival, I think we would see why we are so exhausted. Because, guess what, it turns out focusing all of

³ <https://upepiscopal.org/mutual-ministry/theological-framework-mission-strategy/>

our energy on maintenance and survival is exhausting. It sucks the joy out of our communal life.

Lily Tomlin, the comedian, once said, “The trouble with the rat race is that even if you win, you’re still a rat.”⁴

We could spend hundreds of hours educating ourselves in the theories of what went wrong, how society is changing, how we got here, and why. But I suppose I’m more concerned with the “now what?”

For whatever reason, you and I were called to ministry in the time of a dying church. Let me say that again. You and I ARE called to ministry in the era of a dying church. It’s an uncomfortable statement isn’t it?

But what if death is not the end.

Wait, don’t we know that death is not the end? Isn’t that what our whole faith is built upon?

We are inundated with measurements and talk about success and church growth, average Sunday attendances and number of pledging members. We talk about people being in “good standing.”⁵ Good standing? Really? Yeah, that’s hospitable.

There are certainly many folks who will sell us curriculum and programs for successful church growth. But it all seems a little silly when we reflect on Jesus’ own ministry.

Jesus was born in stable, not a palace. At one point, sure, he had crowds of thousands coming to hear him speak and more than a few times he had to run away from the masses to even get some peace and quiet. But in the end, even his closest friends deserted him.

Might we imagine freeing ourselves from this burden of saving the institutional church? What would it look like if we focused on God’s actual dream for us?

The Rev. Anna Olson, an Episcopal priest, wrote one of my favorite books, and I’ve used it with a number of faith communities. It’s called *Claiming Resurrection in the Dying Church: Freedom Beyond Survival*. And in it, she

⁴ Wheatley, M. J. *Perserverence*. Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler, 2010. p 76.

⁵ *Constitution and Canons together with the Rules of Order*: Adopted at General Convention 2018.

wrote, “Might it be idolatrous to assume that church as we know it is the future that God intends? Might we have built little towers of Babel and gotten lost in the beauty and everlastingness of things we have built? Might it be God who is calling us toward death, even pushing us, because God wants so much to include us in the resurrection?”⁶

*Let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new.*⁷

What would it look like to let go of trying to do God’s job, and instead focus on each of our own roles and responsibilities? Those priestly, apostolic, and diaconal tasks that equip us with exactly the right gifts and skills for our particular, unique place and time.

The specific ministries of reconciliation, servanthood, and apostolic witness which we celebrate this evening in the people to be commissioned, Craig and Kelsey, Rena, and Leland, and Chip, are reminders of the work we have been given to do. To love God and to love our neighbor. And what if it’s as simple as those two things that scripture reminds us are the greatest of all? To love God and love your neighbor as yourself.

The beauty of those two commands is that just about anyone can do them in some way, at ANY stage of life in all our differing abilities.

And we can do it together in any community, whether we are thriving or struggling, bursting at the seams, and rolling in endowments, or wondering how we might keep the lights on.

The Good News I am here to share is that if we die doing this work of Love, we have nothing to fear but resurrection.

And honestly, if John the Baptist stood here before us, he might be calling us a brood of vipers too.

Because, dear Lord, let us confess, that we have placed the buildings and the titles and the money and dare I say our priests and bishops at the center, forgetting that it is our Creator at the center.

⁶ Olson, A., 2016. *Claiming Resurrection in the Dying Church: Freedom Beyond Survival*. Westminster: John Knox Press.

⁷ Episcopal Church. *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church : Together with the Psalter or Psalms of David According to the Use of the Episcopal Church*. New York: Seabury Press, 1979. p 528

We have, as a church, become, for the most part, communities centered around a clergy person to provide us access to sacraments – a very consumeristic exchange. Rather than being a community of ministers, a community of disciples, with Christ at the center.

We have forgotten that it is *not* the role of the clergy solely to be the storytellers. It is the role of every baptized person to be a storyteller of our own lives and a witness to the way God is showing up for us.

And while we are being honest, it's time to tell the truth that we have done a whole lot of horrible things in the name of God on behalf of the Church.

As Bishop Samuel Wylie, from Northern Michigan, said, “There is no social injustice the church condemns that it has not practiced itself, no economic exploitation of which we have not been guilty... We have acted out of our affluence not our courage.”⁸

And here's the hard part. We cannot go back.

We cannot erase what has been done.

As my Indigenous relatives remind me, everything has changed. The air has changed. Even the water. Nothing remains as it has from the beginning.⁹

But we can move together toward a new way of being.

Because we believe in resurrection. We believe in life after death.

And we have an opportunity, a privilege really, to lean into it. To embrace, what we might call holy fear, with a willingness to change, so that God's reign might be more clearly expressed than we have ever seen in our lifetime.

Change, repentance, turning toward what is right is scary, especially as leaders in our church, because it is about openness, and it is about humility.

It is a posture of being vulnerable to the Holy Spirit so that we actually mean it when we pray “Thy will be done.” Even if that means changing the

⁸ http://s3.amazonaws.com/dfc_attachments/public/documents/2500072/A_Celebration_of_Smallness.pdf

⁹ Conversation with Dr. Martin Reinhardt, Professor Native American Studies, Northern Michigan University, Monday, August 9, 2021.

structures that we are content with. Those structures that some of us have benefited from. The same structures that have always left certain folks out and valued the gifts of some more than others. But as the great Verna Dozier said, “There are no second-class citizens in the household of God.”¹⁰

Embracing this new way of being, means being willing to be foolish enough to press on even when we know that mistakes will happen, because this kind of foolishness might actually be wiser than the kind of control that keeps everything in place.

It also means acknowledging loss. Acknowledging the feelings of sadness that for many of us we are not going back to that idealized version of church where the pews were filled and the children sat quietly in their Sunday best.

Of all of the issues and challenges and losses and struggles we are facing, the truth remains that we do not have the answers. We don’t know what to do.

And that’s not an admission of defeat, but it’s an invitation to experiment. An invitation to take risks. An invitation to say yes. An invitation to lean into curiosity.

And curiosity is that space that drew those early catechists out into the wilderness to find John. Curiosity about what was actually going on with the people who had been somehow changed by this strange thing called baptism.

And in their curiosity, they discovered an opportunity for new life, an invitation to wholeness. A connection to the divine.

But, in order to go there, they had to embrace death and loss. “No more of that violence,” John told the soldiers. “No more trickery and greed,” he told the tax collectors. This new life, it’s not the easy way out. It is a life of integrity.

The truth is that each of us and each of our communities are perfect and complete. There is nothing that we lack.

¹⁰ Dozier, V. J. *The calling of the laity: Verna Dozier's anthology*. Washington, DC: The Alban Institute. (1988). p 115.

Let me say that again. The truth is that each of us and each of our communities are perfect and complete. There is nothing that we lack.

We must trust that other people are worth the struggle. That every situation is workable. And we must commit to keep going. To stay with it. Even if the fruits of our labor won't be realized in our lifetime.

All we can do is walk faithfully together toward new life.

Here is my prayer for you good people of Minnesota this evening. That you commit together, today, to use your gifts for ministry doing what is most fun and most important and life-giving and most loving and authentic.

That you enjoy one another, rejoice in seeing Christ in one another, and reconcile quickly when you step on one another's toes.

What a privilege it is to see God remaking the world.

What a joy it is to ride this wave of hope together (even when it sometimes feels like peek-a-boo hope, and even when sometimes we may need to borrow the hope of one another).

The good news is that God will provide a table in the wilderness, because God has always called us out to the wilderness. The way of the world, the way of the empire is not our model. It leads us to death. But God has always saved us, even if by just a remnant.

I want to close with a reflection from Meg Wheatley's book, "Perseverance," which she credits to the elders of the Hopi Nation in Oraibi, Arizona.

To my fellow swimmers:

Here is a river flowing now very fast.

It is so great and swift that there are those who will be afraid, who will try to hold on to the shore. They are being torn apart and will suffer greatly.

Know that the river has its destination. The elders say we must let go of the shore. Push off into the middle of the river, and keep our heads above water.

And I say see who is there with you and celebrate. At this time in history, we are to take nothing personally, least of all ourselves, for the moment we do, our spiritual growth and journey come to a halt.

The time of the lone wolf is over. Gather yourselves. Banish the word struggle from your attitude and vocabulary.

All that we do now must be done in a sacred manner and in celebration. For we are the ones we have been waiting for.”¹¹

Amen.

¹¹ Wheatley, M. J. *Perserverence*. Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler, 2010. Introduction.