

Ordinary and Extraordinary Lives

Sermon for Jan 19, 2020

The 30th Anniversary of the

Extraordinary Ordinations of Ruth Frost, Phyllis Zillhart, and Jeff Johnson

by Pr. Bea Chun

St. Francis Lutheran Church



*Love the LORD our God with all your heart,
with all your soul, and with all your mind,
and to love our neighbor as yourself.*

Matthew 22:37-39

Grace to you and peace from the one who is and the one who was and the one who is to come:

This weekend our country observes and honors the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. As a faith community we give thanks for the many ways in which Dr. King brought renewal and awareness for the need of greater justice to church and society.

But here at St. Francis there is a second way in which this weekend is special: 30 years ago, on January 20, 1990, both you, the congregation of St. Francis, and the congregation of First United Lutheran Church made history: You called Phyllis Zillhart and Ruth Frost to be your pastors here at St. Francis. And First United called Jeff Johnson to be their pastor. Both congregations deliberately violated the policy of the ELCA, which did not allow for the ordination of openly gay and lesbian clergy unless they had made a commitment to celibacy.

And since these three candidates could not be ordained within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, there had to be an extraordinary ordination. And extraordinary it was, in both meanings of the word.

In church terms, extraordinary means outside of the regular order of the church. But the ordinations were also in extraordinary in the sense that they were spectacular, impressive, and highly dramatic.

The Reverend Steve Harms recently provided the following recollection of the event: I am now quoting from his blog with a few modifications (*in print, the recollections of Rev. Harms are all in italics*)

These are highlights from the joyous liturgy ordaining Ruth, Phyllis and Jeff many years ago. Context: The ELCA was two years old; 10,000 men had died in San Francisco from AIDS during the previous decade; and San Francisco Lutheran Clergy claimed our theological heritage to follow the inspiration and authority of the Holy Spirit to call and ordain God's candidates. St. Paulus Lutheran Church hosted us, nearly 1,000 people attended. I (Steve Harms) worked with a Liturgy Team to design the ordination.

30 Drummers from the Sons of Orpheus (founder Bruce Silverman) lined the entrance steps. As people arrived they passed through this 'Loving Gauntlet' charged with a primal energy that nothing will be the same once you enter here. The drummers led the Processional with approximately 80 clergy participating, 65 of them Lutherans.

A Litany of Defrocked Clergy preceded the Processional naming 30 clergy defrocked or prevented from serving the church for being gay. A powerful moment of grieving

We asked Bishop Krister Stendahl to preach because of his international reputation as a forward-thinking theological scholar. Unfortunately, his schedule did not permit. Therefore, Jeff (Johnson) and I asked that he send a Reflection about the Meaning of this Ordination, and that served as our New Testament Epistle.

[Bishop Stendahl complied, and here is what he wrote:

To the ordinands
Ruth Frost, Phyllis Zillhart, and Jeff Johnson

Since I cannot be at your ordination which -- it seems -- must take place *extra ordinem*, I want to send you a greeting affirming my conviction that the steps that your congregations and you are taking stand well before God.

This conviction of mine is based on my studies of the Scriptures and it was tested in the deliberations of the Council of Bishops and the General Assemblies of the Church of Sweden. In the Council of Bishops we agreed to disagree as to the imposition of the celibate life on persons of homosexual orientation. It seem to me that especially in the Lutheran tradition it would be pastorally questionable to make a

celibate lifestyle a condition for ministry, although the free choice of celibate lifestyle has both its dignity and its place in the church and also among us Lutherans. I am convinced that as Christians all of us must live our sexuality responsibly, and that Christian ethics puts equal emphasis on fidelity and mutuality.

My conviction is also that it is right for your congregations to proceed in an extraordinary manner and find ways for your ordination. Church history in general and Lutheran history in particular supply precedents. The rather recent case of an Episcopalian ordination of Women Priests (in Philadelphia) which was only later accepted by that church makes it reasonable to expect that something similar will happen also for you.

I am sure that you appreciate the magnitude of change in the attitudes and thinking that new insight and openness as to gay and lesbian reality has brought into the church. Therefore, as you now assume a ministry of pioneers and a pioneering ministry, it is my sincere prayer that you be given much grace and joy in the Spirit so that you can be preserved from bitterness and condescension toward those leaders and members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America who are not ready yet to rejoice with you in the new chapter which you have been called to write in the history of the Lutheran ministry in the USA.

Signed
Krister Stendahl
Bishop emeritus
of the Diocese on Stockholm
Church of Sweden

On the Eve of the Feast of Epiphany

AD 1990]

https://www.elm.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/IMG_0429-e1567094162486.jpeg

The recollections of Rev. Harms continue in italics . . .

[This epistle](#) became the document that outraged the 65 bishops of the ELCA, and it brought contention for years. They publicly demanded by what authority do you speak for our church – since Stendahl was a Swedish Bishop who had taught at Harvard.

A Gospel Processional proceeded down the center aisle of the Gothic St.

Paulus, where Rev. Jack Schiemann proclaimed the Gospel. As he began, the fog of San Francisco broke for a moment and the sun shone brilliantly through the stained glass windows on Jack, crucifer and acolytes. This classic, sunlit illumination of the Gospel was happily savored by many. Drummers enthusiastically took the procession back to their places as I danced Rev. Carter Heyward to the pulpit. Having climbed the steps she arrived in the elevated pulpit and the drummers dramatically stopped. She let out a gasped shriek and said, "I've never begun preaching like this before!"

The Ordination Rite began with Jim Lawson dancing a Fire Dance. Grasping flames from the Fire Stick he was carrying, he cast flames upon each of the candidates sitting in the front row. We continued with the traditional Ordination Rite lead by Rev. John Frykman of First United and Rev. Jim DeLange of St. Francis, whose congregations were both expelled from the ELCA for issuing their calls to ministry. Many years later they were reinstated.

The culminating Greeting of Peace was a moment of pure ecstasy with the whole congregation blessing and dancing to the drumming. A richness of Spirit that could never be contained.

The Eucharist Prayer included this memorable line, "You have made us giddy with the freedom of laughter and joy".

Ruth, Phyllis and Jeff shared the Benediction.

For our Recession, the Thurifer (incense bearer) had tied long rainbow ribbons to the thurible. He was a member of Grace Cathedral (Episcopal high church) who was shocked and delighted by the joy and depth of the liturgy. I gave him the nod to begin the Recession and as he passed by me he said, "This occasion warrants Queen Anne's". Swinging the thurible in circles over his head with rainbow ribbons flying in all directions he led everyone down the center aisle. And with immense joy the whole congregation came out.

Rev. Steve Harms (he/him/his)
Senior Pastor at Peace Lutheran in Danville, CA.
Former President of the Interfaith Council
Founder of Ruah Drama Ministry.

<https://www.elm.org/2020/01/09/a-remembrance-30th-anniversary-of-the-first-extraordinary-ordinations-january-20-1990/>

As I reflect on this account, I have many different emotions.

My first emotion is deep gratitude, gratitude to the Holy Spirit for nudging a group of courageous people into this historic breakthrough and gratitude for the courage of those who responded to the nudge of the Holy Spirit.

I am grateful, because this extraordinary action began a process of renewal in the church that extended far beyond St Francis, far beyond San Francisco, far beyond even the United States, all the way to South Africa, where there is now a thriving ministry of queer liberation, all because of these historic ordinations. I am grateful, because this extraordinarily action was the beginning of a process that led to a profound change in the policy of the church. Thanks to this change it has been possible for me as a lesbian pastor to continue in ordained ministry.

But above all, I am grateful for the way in which this extraordinary action has strengthened and confirmed the core convictions of our Lutheran faith--it has put our faith to the test and made it better.

Imagine you build a little boat somewhere in your garage and the boat looks impressive: it looks well designed and well crafted. But in the end, it doesn't matter how you boat looks. In the end, the true test of the boat is how well it holds up in the water, and whether it can carry you or whether it will sink.

In my thinking the extraordinary ordinations were such a test of the boat; they were a test to see how well our Lutheran theology holds up when put to the test:

And the test is this: When we say we are saved by grace and not by our own effort, do we really mean it? Or do we secretly mean: We are saved by grace and also by having the right kind of sexuality. We are saved by grace and also by our good standing in the church. We are saved by grace and also by our correct moral approach. But any time we add one more thing to grace, any time we say we are saved by grace, and by a little something else, anytime there is even the tiniest requirement beyond grace, then salvation by grace alone is destroyed. Are we really saved by grace and grace alone without any other requirements? The extraordinary ordinations put this question to the test, and they prevailed. They did not prevail right away, there was a trial, an expulsion, a long process of advocacy, and years and years of theological paper writing in the way that theologians and bureaucrats love to write papers. But in the end, when all was said and done, grace prevailed, and our tradition has come out stronger. The principle of grace applies. Always. And for that outcome I am grateful. So, gratitude is my number one emotion when I think about the events of January 20, 1990.

But I confess that I have other emotions as well, emotions that are a bit less noble. When I reflect on the extraordinary ordinations, I sometimes feel very small. Compared to the courage taken by you, the congregation, and the courage of the extraordinarily ordained pastors, compared to these brave acts, what have I done? What have I contributed? My own contributions seem rather small in comparison. My life and accomplishments seem paltry in comparison to others.

And these feelings of smallness then produce a sense of anxiety: Is there something more I should be doing right now? Is there something I am overlooking?

As I was sitting with these feelings of smallness, I came across some helpful lines in a little book called "Small Graces" by Kent Nerburn. He writes:

"We dream of the touch on our shoulders
that would call us to greatness,
to an act that would change the world.
But the touches on our shoulder
call us only to the small acts
of everyday life
 – changing diapers, changing light-bulbs,
changing schedules.
Far from being exalted beings,
we seem to be prisoners of the ordinary,
and we are haunted by the
insignificance of our days.

We must learn to see with other eyes.
The world contains many paths,
some exalted, some mundane.
It is not our task to judge the worthiness of our path;
it is our task to walk our path with worthiness.
We have been blinded by the bright light of heroes
and saints.
We must learn to trust the small light
we are given,
and to value the light that we can shed
into the lives of those around us.

I really, really love this line: It is not our task to judge the worthiness of our path; it is our task to walk our path with worthiness. And how do we do this? How do we walk our path with worthiness? We do it by following what Jesus asked us to do:

*to love the LORD our God with all your heart,
with all your soul, and with all your mind,
and to love our neighbor as yourself.*
Matthew 22:37-39

Such simple words, yet they are far from simple.
Here is a story a friend told me just a few days ago. He had an appointment with a social service agency. There was a very long line, and the line was moving slowly. The room was cold and very

damp from the rain, and my friend hurt all over, because he had recently had a stroke. In the line behind him there was a woman with a small child, and the child became more and more restless, and finally the woman had a meltdown and in some way this meltdown involved my friend, and an argument broke out, and heated words were exchanged. Afterward, my friend felt ashamed: Why did I lose my temper? Why did I unravel like this? “You are human,” I said, “you were tired and cold, you were achy and anxious from the waiting.” Still, I want to do better, he said, I want to do better and I want to be better. “Yes,” I said, “that is something we can all strive for, and sometimes we will succeed by the grace of God with the help of the Holy Spirit.”

The Holy Spirit gives us all kinds of extraordinary moments. Sometimes they take the shape of extraordinary ordinations, and other times they take the shape of extraordinary patience when the limits of our capacity are tested. It is not our task to judge the worthiness of our path; it is our task to walk our path with worthiness.

May God grant us to walk with worthiness.

Amen.