

Galatians 3:28, Acts 2:16-18, John 21:15-17

word count: 1631

Once, long ago in a small town near where I grew up, there was a Congregational church that hosted an ordination for their new pastor. There is nothing remarkable about this town, except for what happened there on this particular day when the church was filled for the ordination.

The preacher that day brought with him a one-sentence text from Galatians. “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

The Rev. Luther Lee stood in the pulpit and declared that no-one has the right to decide who is called to preach the Gospel. He reminded them that there is neither male nor female, slave or free person, for if we believe that we are all connected as brothers and sisters in our faith, then we are all one. Lee preached that it is God who calls people to be ministers of the Gospel, and the people of God simply affirm that call in ordination.

After he finished preaching, the young woman who was being called to this church’s pulpit came forward to be ordained, just as you will be shortly.

When hands were laid on her head and shoulders; when the prayer was finished—it was reported that the Spirit had poured itself all across the room—over children, in both men and women, and through the elders who had lived to see something new. The feeling was visceral, alive, transformative. They had done something together that day as a gathered community with the presence of the Ground of All-Being that we name as “God,” in the small, unremarkable town of South Butler, New York...that forever changed us.

When Antoinette Brown stood alone again, she did so as the first woman ordained to Christian ministry. Something new happened. It challenged cultural limitations and stretched imaginations with regard to just how wide Jesus’ net of radical inclusion was cast.

I take pride in knowing that this took place within the tradition into which you are being ordained, as it did in other ways with the ordinations of Lemuel Haynes, and Bill Johnson. Each time we gather for an event like this, we remember that it is never just about one person, but rather it is something shared within a gathered community (with the Spirit present) that saw in that person gifts for ministry.

I ask you to consider three things in these next few moments.

As a pastor, challenge us to think theologically, but also help us to feel. You’ve come to a place full of thinking people who like to exercise their brains vigorously.

We know what color beads the Jesus Seminar folks cast for what was actually said, what might have been said, what probably wasn’t said, and what was definitely never uttered.

We’ve plumbed with Plumer, we’re Borgacized, Pagelized, and we’re already in training for next month’s Spongathon.

Our brains are ready—we’re with you. Remind us to use our hearts, too. Remind us to ask, “Where is the Ground of All Being—where is God in this?” Share your story and your feelings with us. Ask us to remember that truth is not necessarily found in what is factual, but resides instead in our collective stories and poetry. If Jesus did not actually still a storm, what is the truth in the story for people whose boats are rocking and whose inner turmoil needs calming?

Gore Vidal said, “It is the spirit of the age to believe that any fact, no matter how suspect, is superior to any imaginative exercise, no matter how true.” Help us to be comfortable engaging

with the kind of post-critical naïveté that allows us to see the difference between being truth seekers and fact-checkers. Someone once said that pure logic is the enemy of spirit. Keep us in touch with our sense of spirit.

Second: Help me to lead us in understanding issues of justice. Find your sense of righteous anger, but learn how to balance it with the unique set of tools you have. One of the interesting things that you bring is in how you have explored different ways of living—either in intentional poverty working with the poorest of the poor, or by settling into life in another country with a different language. You have a natural poise and you radiate a sense of inner calm—it will be tested. Elizabeth, find your passion and walk into the center of it. People will naturally follow. Help us to see injustice and assist us to find ways of addressing it.

During Prop 8, many of our churches represented here walked into the heart of the battle, ours included. Speaking for myself, it was frequently difficult to be out front encountering the kind of ugliness that surfaced, especially when it was so personal. My mantra during that time came from Arthur Schopenhauer, who said, “All truth passes through three stages. First, it is ridiculed. Second, it is violently opposed. Third, it is accepted as being self-evident.”

Be a pastor who is unafraid to stand on the side of truth when it is being violently opposed. You will find the best colleagues there. And many of them are in this room.

Finally, feed the flock.

We are blessed to have you beginning your ministry with us. We recognize the gifts you possess that you will develop here. Help us to build a strong program for young families and adults; love the kids who come forward on Sunday morning, and build relationships with them while imparting to them a theology of love and respect for God and for each other, no matter who they are. In your own way, one step at a time, help to restore a healthy image of what it means to be a Christian in America. Your own example will go far.

I think of our churches as faith outposts in a Christianist wilderness. We try here to attempt to witness to an understanding of faith that compels us to emulate Jesus’ example of loving wastefully. Our Bible is open in every way. It is not a weapon.

Only 20% of our congregation grew up in the UCC. The rest of arrived here because they no longer fit nor felt comfortable in the places from which they came. We are a spiritual Ellis Island of faith refugees looking for a new place of great promise in which to build a home. After Prop 8, our numbers grew with people from even more divergent church backgrounds than before.

Knowing this, one Sunday I asked during the sermon for a show of hands of how many people had ever wanted to leave their church. A guest, a man who did not know our congregation’s background, or why I would ask such a question, looked alarmed when four-fifths of the congregation raised their hands. To him, it looked like an insurrection. He was the first one to greet me at the door. He took my hand in both of his, shook it, and said, “God bless you, and good luck.” Ours is a congregation that is here very intentionally.

Three times Jesus told Peter, “Feed my sheep.” We are a vibrant, different, outside-of-the-box collection of seekers from all over the theological map. Love the people, Elizabeth, and they will love you back. I hope I can say that it has been my experience that this is true, and I know it will be true for you as well. Feed us with your knowledge, your passion, and with the love and care you are charged to take with us. Because of your ministry, we will be forever changed.

The Rev. Luther Lee concluded his sermon with the simple words from Galatians 3:28 that imply that God confers upon every kind of person gifts of the spirit. Peter Rollins, a writer on the emergent church movement, takes it further in a chapter from a book he is still working on. He says:

“But what if the church is called to provide a space where, just for a moment, we encounter one another as neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free? And what if Paul didn’t just mean these three categories, as if all the others remained intact? What if he was implying that there is neither black nor white in Christ, neither rich nor poor, neither powerful nor powerless?

“What if we could go even further and say that the space Paul wrote of was one in which there would be neither republican nor democrat, liberal nor conservative, orthodox nor heretic? Indeed, in the spirit of the text, what if we could offer an interpretive translation of Paul’s words that would read, “You are all children of God through your faith. There is neither high church nor low church, Fox nor CNN, citizen nor alien, capitalist nor communist, gay nor straight, beautiful nor ugly, East nor West, theist nor atheist, Israel nor Palestine, hawk nor dove, American nor Iraqi, married nor divorced, uptown nor downtown, terrorist nor freedom fighter, priest nor prophet, fame nor obscurity, Christian nor non-Christian, for all are made one in {Christ Jesus} our faith.”

Something new is happening here today, and in your ordination I hope that it will challenge our self-imposed limitations and stretch our imaginations once again with regard to just how wide Jesus’ net of radical inclusion was cast.

And, as hands are laid on you and the room prays with you in that ephemeral moment, may you feel the presence that is visceral, alive and transformative. We are doing something together as a gathered community with the presence of the Ground of all Being that we name as “God,” and we *will* be forever changed because of what is yet to come. Amen.

Scripture for Sunday, January 10, 2009 at 3:00 p.m.

Galatians 3:28

There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Acts 2:16-18

16 No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: **17** " 'in the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. **18** Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.

John 21:15-17

15 When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my lambs." **16** Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me?" He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep." **17** The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my sheep.