

Rev. Sharon A. Benton

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Plymouth UCC

Untraditional – Jamie’s Ordination Sermon
 Ecclesiastes 2:1-11
 Mark 10:35-45

It is traditional, at an ordination in the United Church of Christ,
 for one who is mentor, guide, wisdom-giver to the ordinand
 to offer the sermon.

I freely admit that I am none of these for Jamie.

I am her spouse,
 her partner,
 her biggest fan
 and co-mover in this life and, now,
 in ministry.

We are equals.

And I am not preaching *to* her – *I wouldn’t dare!*

Yes, this is untraditional.

But, for those of you who know Jamie, I ask you:
 when has she ever been constrained by tradition?

She took her rural Iowa farm girl roots all the way to a pre-eminent woman’s college outside Boston.
 She’s lived on both the Atlantic and Pacific coasts
 and now has been called to ministry in the in-between of Greeley, CO.

She’s taken the depths of her Roman Catholic upbringing
 and nourished it within Episcopal and Methodist settings.

And she finds her own inherent diversity
 richly reflected in her chosen denomination:
 the United Church of Christ.

Such broad experiences will add insight into her unconventional tendencies;
 and those will only enhance her ministry.

Even the Hebrew Bible text she chose may seem a bit “different” for such a celebratory service:
 “all is vanity and a chasing after wind.”

How many people do you know who claim the despondent preaching of Ecclesiastes
 as one of their favorite Biblical books?

Yet even more than it being a favorite,
 Jamie has paired this reading with Mark’s to emphasize
 her expectations of life and ministry –
 which is very much *outside* our cultural expectations of greatness.

Societal greatness sometimes fits right in with Ecclesiastes’ description:

“So I became great
 and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem.
 Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them;
 I kept my heart from no pleasure.”

And Jesus cautions his greatness-seeking disciples,
 “You know
 that among the gentiles
 those whom they recognize as their... great ones
 are tyrants over them.”

People may say,
 “you’re a *great* preacher” or
 “you’re a *great* spiritual leader,”
 but these two texts remind us that, in ordination,
 clergy are not greater than the laity,
 not set above in the *conventional way* –
 we remain equals –
 we are simply set apart for a specific work:
service
 in and through the church.

Greatness is defined through how well we serve Christ;
 how faithfully we share and live out his message.

Striving for greatness as society expects it is “striving after wind”
 when compared with Jesus’ own non-conformist definition of
 being servant of God’s love.

And this reversal of societal expectations reminds us that
 breaking expectation –
breaking tradition –
is a part of our religious tradition.

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157 years ago, another sermon was preached at a *very* unconventional ordination.  
 It’s words apply here today:

“We are here assembled on a very interesting and solemn occasion....There are in the world, and there may be among us, false views of the nature and object of ordination. I do not believe that any special or specific form of ordination is necessary to constitute a gospel minister. We are not here to make a minister. It is not to confer on this our sister a right to preach the gospel. If she has not that right already, we have no power to communicate it to her. Nor have we met to qualify her for the work of the ministry. If God, and mental and moral culture, have not already qualified her, we can not by any thing we may do by way of ordaining or setting her apart....All we are here to do, and all we expect to do, is...to subscribe our testimony to the fact, that, in our belief,...[Jamie Lynne Kepros] is one of the ministers of the new covenant, authorized, qualified and called of God, to preach the gospel of...Jesus Christ. This is all; but even this renders the occasion interesting and solemn.”

*Interesting, indeed!*

These words – minus Jamie’s name, of course – were preached in 1853 at the ordination of Antoinette Brown: the first woman ordained in modern times.  
*Definitely untraditional.*

In ordaining Antoinette Brown,  
the Church was saying,

“yes: Christ has called you to serve,  
and we cannot do anything about it –  
for or against.”

And they knew it would not be easy.

Neither clergy nor laity would know what to do with her radically different service –  
as many will not know what to do with Jamie,

a young-out-lesbian-feminist-campus-minister-with-tattoos  
in Greeley, CO–

but the church could not stand on *tradition* to deny Antoinette Brown her ministry.

*Because this is a part of our tradition* – to stretch beyond set expectations.

Not simply for the sake of doing so,  
but to be faithful in following the Gospel.

When Christ calls us to serve, it is not a chasing after wind – it is the fullness of our very purpose;  
and it is for *all* of us:  
the priesthood of all believers.

We are all called to ministry, all called to serve God daily and wholeheartedly.

Yet, as one preacher has put it, “The pastor gathers us, makes sure the bills get paid, and helps us to  
develop theological language to describe and re-describe our lives.”

This is not *greatness*, but *servanthood* through and with the Church.

This is ordained ministry.

Today, Jamie is not set above –

as I am not set above,  
nor any other clergyperson or  
official of the Church –

but she is set *apart*, named to serve.

All we are here to do

is subscribe our testimony

to the fact that Jamie Lynne Kepros

is authorized,

qualified

and called of God.

Amen.