

Watching the Detectives

Michigan Annual Conference
RCO Sermon.

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Texts: Matthew 13:24-30; I Corinthians 4:1-5

I am so delighted to be able to be in-person for this service of recognition, commissioning and ordination. This is the first such service in the Michigan Conference since 2019, and some of you have waited an entire year to be commissioned or ordained. I regret we could not have more people here, regret that you who are being welcomed into a new relationship with the Michigan Conference are not today surrounded by your clergy siblings who would be singing to and with you. Yet know that they are here in spirit, celebrating you and wishing you every success in ministry.

As you have already experienced, one practice of the clergy covenant community is that every year when we gather, we sing the Charles Wesley hymn, “And Are We Yet Alive”. That may be something that ought to give you pause. What sort of group is it that every year asks if you are still alive?

The song acknowledges that licensed and ordained ministry can be difficult and challenging. “What troubles have we seen, what mighty conflicts past, fightings without and fears within, since we assembled last!” That verse ends with an exclamation point! It wasn’t even composed during a pandemic. The song is a hopeful song, though. The very next verse: “Yet out of all the Lord hath brought us by his love; and still he doth his help afford, and hides our life above.” Year after year, we acknowledge the difficulties and we celebrate how it is that God’s love still carries us through, that God’s love is the reason we do what we do.

The last phrase, though, is one I want to spend a bit of time with. “And hides our life above.” Charles Wesley was echoing Colossians 3:3: “for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” Your life is hidden with Christ in God.

There is an important and powerful word here for us, for we who are part of the set-apart ministry of the church, and I take that phrase “set-apart ministry” from The Book of Discipline, ¶301.2: “Within the church community, there are persons whose gifts, evidence of God’s grace, and promise of future usefulness are affirmed by the community, and who respond to God’s call by offering themselves in leadership as set-apart ministers, ordained and licensed.”

So what is the important and powerful word for us in Colossians 3:3, your life is hidden with Christ in God? The writer of Colossians was wanting the recipients of his letter to focus on God things by telling them that this was where their real life was. Good message. For me, these words have also come to mean that I am not only who I am as a clergy person and bishop. There is part of me, an important part of me, that is distinct from, and not subsumed in, who I am as a set-apart minister – in my case an ordained elder in the church who was also elected a bishop. When criticism comes my way, I take it seriously, seek to learn from it, and also know that there is part of me that is not just the bishop. To lead is to be open to criticism. To lead change, even needed change, opens you to being criticized and second-guessed and misunderstood. The family systems theorist, Rabbi Edwin Friedman is known to have quipped, “no good deed goes unpunished.” We will experience criticism - some of it will be unfair, some of it will hurt, and some of it will be accurate, and it is good to remind yourself, “my life is hidden with Christ in God.”

It is important for you to know and remember that you are not only who you are as a set-apart minister, licensed or ordained. You are loved and cherished by God, you have a life with God that goes beyond who you are as a clergy person. This may seem like a heel of the hand to the forehead thing to say. Yet it is easy to forget. It is easy to forget because while who you are is distinct from and not subsumed in who you are as a clergy person, who you are is also intimately intertwined with being a clergy person.

This is one of those complex, messy, both/and things. You are not only who you are as a clergy person, yet who you are is intimately intertwined with who you are as a clergy person. You need to do your soul work, you need to tend to your journey with Jesus, you need to attend to your relationship with God, simply as a follower of Jesus. Soul work is intrinsically valuable for its own sake, and without doing that work you will not be the kind of clergy leader you can be and the church needs you to be. We need leaders who can lead authentically. So do your soul work for its own sake and for the sake of your ministry.

Let me offer an image here. The psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott published an insightful essay in 1958 entitled "The Capacity to Be Alone." He argues that the capacity to be alone is a sign of maturity in emotional development. His argument is that this capacity is rooted in a relational capacity to be alone in the presence of another, the primary example being a supportive enough parent who provides enough love to a child so that the child develops a sense of self and from that an ability to be alone. Winnicott is positing a sense of self, a soul, that can be distinguished from and yet is supported by a web of relationships.

You are not only who you are as a clergy person, yet who you are is intimately intertwined with who you are as a clergy person. Do your soul work for its own sake and for the sake of your ministry.

Part of our necessary soul work is to have some things that touch us, that we enjoy, that are separate from our role as clergy. Yet even here, what is distinguishable is not always completely separable.

I enjoy movies. I enjoy reading. I enjoy music. I intentionally choose to watch some things that seem to have nothing to do with being a bishop. I intentionally read books that are not about church leadership or theology or spirituality. I listen to music that would not find its way into a worship service. Even so, sometimes I will be watching a movie and think, "What a great sermon illustration!" Or I will be reading a book and the same thing happens. I use song titles for sermon illustrations and sermon titles. "Watching the Detectives" is an Elvis Costello song from his first album, "My Aim is True." It is a great song, and except for serving as a sermon title, it has little connection with being a bishop.

I mentioned reading that is not directly related to being a bishop, and included in that reading for me is mystery or detective fiction. Among my favorite authors here are Nevada Barr who sets her mysteries in National Parks, Louise Penny, and William Kent Krueger who is from Minnesota and sets many of his stories there. Since moving to Michigan, I have discovered a classic author of detective fiction, a writer who received a Ph.D. in literature from the University of Michigan, but wrote detective novels, most featuring the private eye, Lew Archer. In the last five years, I've read all the Lew Archer novels Ross MacDonald published.

Mysteries. If I could, I would like to put a bookmark in here, pun intended, and set aside mystery fiction. Instead, I would like to focus on mystery. A little free association here.

In writing about ministry, Paul, in First Corinthians, says, “Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ, and stewards of God’s mysteries.” Eugene Peterson, in The Message, renders this, “guides into God’s most sublime secrets.” Paul is writing about church leadership here. We are stewards of the mysteries of God, guides into God’s most sublime secrets.

Mystery. The theologian Karl Rahner wrote: “What is called knowledge in everyday parlance, is only a small island in a vast sea that has not been traveled.... Hence the existential question for the knower is this: Which does he love more, the small island of so-called knowledge or the sea of infinite mystery” (front piece in Gordon Kaufman, In Face of Mystery). The theologian Gordon Kaufman wrote, “[Mystery] refers to bafflement of mind more than obscurity of perception. A mystery is something we find we cannot think clearly about, cannot get our minds around, cannot manage to grasp.... What we are dealing with here seems to be beyond what our minds can handle.” (In Face of Mystery, 60)

As leaders, we should take great care in being stewards of mystery. Mystery is not meant to short-change thinking. One of the critical needs in our time is the on-going development of a thoughtful Christian faith, a faith that is able to engage with the overwhelming flood of information that comes our way by thinking through it faithfully. Social media is a gift, as we have discovered in this time of pandemic. Social media is also a platform for conspiracy thinking, inaccurate information and specious arguments.

Yet to acknowledge mystery, and that God is often found in mystery, is to acknowledge the limits of our minds. We can describe with our minds the kinesthetic dimensions of holding

a baby, but there is a certain mystery to the experience of holding a baby that you helped bring into the world, or that your child helped bring into the world. We can describe with our minds hormones and brain activity, but there remains a certain mystery in the experience of being in love. We can describe with our minds the idea of common humanity, how human beings across cultures, races, ethnicities, genders share a common genetic heritage, but I remain baffled by the human ingenuity in putting people into separate categories and ranking those categories in systems of caste. I am even more baffled by the human unwillingness to look honestly at some of our history of race and caste. And what does the mystery of God have to do with our bonding, our loving, our caste systems and our unwillingness to examine and change them? And where is God in the midst of a pandemic, in the midst of injustice and oppression, when there is senseless violence and useless, premature death? Where is God in the midst of broken relationships, abuse, addiction. How does God care about and for the world, and how does God invite human flourishing and beloved community?

Yet we know and trust God cares, and God works. God works through God's creative love, and as Gordon Kaufman reminds us, "creativity happens: this is an absolutely amazing mystery" (In the Beginning... Creativity, 56)

I chose to have Jesus' parable of the wheat and the weeds read for this service because it reminds us of the complexity of leading, reminds us that as leaders we are to be stewards of the mysteries of God, guides into God's most sublime secrets. It is a mystery of the world that wheat and weeds are so intertwined, that not all is simply this or that. Wheat and weeds can be found in most of our lives and in our faith communities. How does God help us diminish the

work of the weeds and enhance the growth of the wheat? It is God's work of creative love that always retains a certain mysterious dimension.

Stewards of God's mysteries, guides to God's sublime secrets – if we are going to do this well, if we are going to live well into this calling, it requires the development of our souls. Do your soul work for its own sake and for the sake of your ministry.

And here is one of those instances where a little soul work for its own sake has fed into my ministry. Remember that bookmark I asked you to place into the mystery stories? We're are going to take it out now. In reading some detective fiction, I find some good descriptions of what it means to be a steward of God's mysteries.

Here is private detective Lew Archer describing a colleague. "Arnie Walters met me at the Reno airport. He was a short broad man in his early fifties who looked like somebody you'd see selling tips at a race track. But he had the qualities of a first-rate detective: honesty, imagination, curiosity, and a love of people." (Ross Macdonald, The Zebra-Stripped Hearse, 112). In a later novel, a woman asks Archer about himself: "'I don't get you Archer. What's your angle?' 'I like people, and I try to be of some service.'" (Black Money, 192)

Know that I am not here diminishing the fact that being a clergy person requires skill development – teaching, preaching, administrative skills, technical skills. Skill development matter. Yet, if we are to be stewards of the mysteries of God, we also need to develop our souls.

Honesty. Can we speak the truth in love? Can we do so even in response to an unloving, wounding question? Max DePree in his book Leadership is an Art, wrote, "the first responsibility of a leader is to define reality" (11). This is not an easy time to be the church.

Can we help our congregations or other places of ministry look honestly at themselves, while also lovingly?

Imagination. The words we use, the images we offer, the creative possibilities we describe have a powerful impact on either facilitating or inhibiting a more positive future for the people and congregations or organizations we lead. Honesty and imagination are wonderful companions. We can mistake the bare statement of facts, preferably statistical facts, for honesty, forgetting that reality also involves the stories that go with those facts. Many of our local church histories do a remarkable job of reciting the years the building was built, an addition added, when pastors changed, when the new ministry began. If you want to know even more, listen to the stories from those who can tell them about what it was like to paint the new addition, what it was like to welcome the children into the new Sunday School room, what it was like to say good-bye to the beloved pastor and to discover how on the other side of grief the congregation found gifts in the new pastor.

To be a Christian, from one angle, is to imagine ourselves in the Christian story. The writer, teacher and preacher Frederick Buechner put it this way: "Listen to Jesus saying, 'Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest' until you can **hear** him if you want to know what faith is all about." (Whistling in the Dark, 70). As faith leaders, stewards of the mysteries of God, we guide people more deeply into this imaginative journey.

Imagination is for more than simply our own spiritual growth or the growth of individuals in faith, or the assessment of congregational life, imagination is needed for ministry to the world. Again, Frederick Buechner: "If you want to know what loving your neighbors is all about, look at them with more than just your eyes.... Try to know them for who they are inside

their skins. Hear not just the words they speak but the words they do not speak. Feel what it's like to be who they are." (Whistling in the Dark, 70). If we are to help overcome divisions in church and world of race, class and caste, it will require courageous imagining, imagining what it is like to live with a history of your people being displaced or enslaved or intentionally impoverished and segregated; or imagining what it is like to be afraid that you might be blamed for a virus that knows no race or ethnicity, but you happen to be of Asian descent; or imagining what it is like to have trained for a skilled job that is no longer needed.

To be able to share God's healing grace, we may need to imagine the inner life of others "below the level of consciousness, down where the luminous monsters swam in cold darkness" to quote a favorite Lew Archer line (Black Money, 223).

Curiosity. Be curious. Love to learn. Honesty and imagination require a deep and searching curiosity. Among my favorite John Wesley writings comes from "The Minutes of Several Conversations Between the Reverend Mr. John and Charles Wesley, And Others." The Minutes are framed in terms of questions and answers. A series of questions begins with "Why is it that people under our care are no better? Answer: Other reasons may occur, but the chief is, because we are not more knowing and more holy. Q: But why are we not more knowing? A: Because we are idle [a very Wesleyan idea – remember that historic question about being diligent?]" Wesley goes on in responding about the importance of reading. "But I read only the Bible." Then you ought to teach others to read only the Bible, and, by parity of reason, to hear only the Bible. But if so, you need preach no more.... This is rank enthusiasm. If you need no book but the Bible, you are got above St. Paul. He wanted others too. 'Bring the books,'

says he, 'but especially the parchments' (Richard Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodist*, 2nd edition, 254-255; Works, vol. 10, p. 887).

To be honest requires imagination. A rich imagination depends upon a deep and searching curiosity to expand its storehouse of words and images.

Love people and seek to serve them. Nothing is more important in being stewards of the mysteries of God, of being guides to God's sublime secrets, than loving those you lead and seeking to bring out their best. Honesty without love and service can become clinical and callous. Imagination without love can lead us to imagine only the worst. Curiosity without love can spin off into flights of intellectual fancy, enjoyable perhaps, but not terribly useful for deepening spirituality, encouraging service, and promoting human flourishing in community which are what we desire as stewards of the mysteries of God.

Virgil Flowers is a detective for the Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension, as created by the novelist John Sanford. Virgil's father is a Lutheran minister.

"The son didn't envy the father. Virgil had been raised in a church, and the problems his father dealt with, he thought, would drive him crazy. It's relatively easy to solve a problem with [the tools of law enforcement]; but what do you do about somebody who is unloved? Better, Virgil thought, to carry a badge, and maintain your amateur status when it came to considering the wonders of the universe." (Heat Lightning, 10)

Well for those being licensed, commissioned, ordained and recognized, and for all of us who are clergy, the problems of being unloved are ours. We cannot not grapple with the wonders of the universe as stewards of the mysteries of God, guides to God's most sublime secrets. In letters I've written recently celebrating some ministry milestones I've said about set

aside ministry: “You have given yourself to one of the most amazing, sometimes heartbreaking, sometimes crazy-making, often joy-filled callings in all the callings of God on human lives.”

That’s what the calling to be stewards of the mysteries of God, guides to God’s most sublime secrets is, one of the most amazing, sometimes heartbreaking, sometimes crazy-making, often joy-filled callings in all the callings of God on human lives.

We affirm this calling on your lives today. We confirm you in this calling. We pledge to support in this calling. Keep saying “yes” to this calling, and do the soul work required for this calling. Do it for your own well-being. Do it to lead well. Do it while watching the detectives. Amen.