

## Make Me a Saxophone

Michigan Annual Conference  
Ordination Sermon

June 3, 2023  
Bishop David Alan Bard

**Texts:** Psalm 150; Romans 12:1-13; Luke 19:28-44

Greetings in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the peace and power of the Holy Spirit. Welcome to you all.

In the days leading up to annual conference I was asked for some reflections by James Deaton, content editor for communications in our conference. James asked me to share some of what I was most excited about at annual conference. One of the things I shared was that I have a special place in my heart for this service of recognition, commissioning and ordination.

This service is **most** special for those being recognized, commissioned, or ordained. I would guess that all of us who are clergy hold a warm place in our hearts for our own ordination or recognition, and I hope that will be the case for you being ordained, commissioned or recognized. In that way, this service is also special for the entire clergy community of the Michigan Conference. It is a time when we renew our commitments to our own calling. For you being recognized, commissioned and ordained, this is a special moment for your family and friends, some gathered here, some watching on-line, and some simply thinking of you now. People have prayed for you, encouraged you, loved you to this place. Today they celebrate with you.

And this is a special moment for me as a bishop. I am joyfully humbled to be in this role welcoming, recognizing, commissioning, and ordaining. Among the special moments in the ministry of a bishop, few match when I offer recognition, place my hands on shoulders for

commissioning, or place my hands on the head of those being ordained, in all cases invoking the Holy Spirit. Such ordinary gestures – hands placed or extended, words spoken, yet there is such power. We encounter something profound and mysterious here, a holy mystery.

Holy mysteries. Holy moments. Our traditional spiritual practices such as corporate worship, individual prayer, Scripture reading, participating in the sacraments, are intended to open us up to wonder, mystery, holy moments, encounters with God’s Spirit. Included among my own spiritual disciplines over the years has been the Prayer of St. Francis. It is in our United Methodist Hymnal, #481. It begins, “Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.” Over the years I have prayed that prayer, and never more frequently than since becoming a bishop. I have wanted that prayer to form me and shape me in this ministry. The prayer has often sustained me in these challenging days.

If spiritual disciplines are intended to open us to more frequent encounters with the Spirit, there are also serendipities of grace, moments when God’s Spirit, in the lovely words of the poet Seamus Heaney, “catch the heart off guard and blow it open” (“Postscript”). And sometimes we are able to turn such moments into their own spiritual disciplines.

I was 21, between my junior and senior years of college, when I was diagnosed with chronic ulcerative colitis. It has, over the years, been pretty well-managed. But I remember when the medications I was taking simply began to fail, and I struggled. I was appointed as a district superintendent at the time, and I have a vivid memory of driving to a retreat center in Minnesota, where there was to be a clergy gathering. I was not feeling spectacular, but was functioning well. I was driving on a beautiful autumn morning, listening to a cassette tape, “Miles Davis Plays Classic Ballads” and the song “Fall” came on. It caught my heart off guard

and blew it open. God's Spirit drew near, or better my attention to the ever-present Spirit of God was heightened. I experienced a sense of awe, wonder, peace, well-being. I was not healed, though thankfully the new medications I was just beginning would work very well.

I had been renewing my relationship with jazz music during this time, watching the Ken Burns series on jazz, but that moment was a beautiful serendipity of grace, and I continue to find in music such serendipities of grace, such that I have made a spiritual discipline of listening.

So the prayer of St. Francis and jazz bring me to a place where I hear the words of the prayer differently. "Lord, make me an instrument." "Praise God with trumpet sound; praise God with lute and harp. Praise God with tambourine and dance; praise God with strings and pipe! Praise God with clanging cymbals; praise God with loud clashing cymbals." Lord, make me an instrument, that sings your praise. And if our lives are not such instruments, singing praise to God, well the stones just might shout out their hosannas to Jesus, their songs of praise to God.

In his book on the prayer of St. Francis, Kent Nerburn writes, "When Francis asks to be made an instrument of God's peace, he is bowing down before God's skill as maker, as musician, as composer of our days, and offering himself up to be shaped into a form through which the voice of God can be heard" (Make Me an Instrument of Your Peace, 7).

To be shaped into a form through which the voice of God can be heard. Make me an instrument, and if I am going to be an instrument, I might pray, "Make me a saxophone." A saxophone. I remember sitting in Professor Schroeder's "Arts in America" classroom when he put the needle down on a record of saxophonist John Coltrane's, "Central Park West." It is a lovely ballad that caught my heart off guard and blew it open. Other Coltrane ballads did the

same, “Naima,” “After the Rain.” Lord, make me a saxophone to play your praises by helping people attend to beauty and tenderness. Coltrane could also play with extraordinary energy and could push the boundaries of any music he was playing. The saxophone can be an energetic instrument. I think of the first time I heard a recording of saxophonist Charlie Parker play “Ko-Ko.” It is a classic in Be-Bop jazz. Rock saxophonists also offer energy. I loved the playing of Clarence Clemons with Bruce Springsteen’s E-Street Band, especially on a song like “Born To Run,” or the saxophone solo on Al Stewart’s song, “Song on the Radio.” Rock saxophonists can be mellow and haunting and tender as well, Alto Reed’s saxophone part on Bob Seger’s “Turn the Page,” a song I referenced in my first sermon as your bishop. And sometimes rock musicians recruit jazz saxophonists – Wayne Shorter on Steely Dan’s “Aja.” Wayne Shorter was also the composer of the Miles Davis Quintet’s song “Fall.”

If I am doing nothing else with this sermon, I am preparing you well for a Jeopardy category – saxophonists. I feel like I should say, “soundtracks for the sermon will be available in the lobby following worship.”

Lord, make me an instrument, make me a saxophone that plays with tenderness, that plays with energy, that plays joyful or beautiful or haunting music that evokes power, or mystery, or wonder, or awe, or love, that catches the heart off guard and blows it open. Lord, make me an instrument. That is my prayer, and that should be your prayer, you who are being welcomed, recognized, commissioned or ordained. Pray that God might shape you into a form through which the voice of God can be heard. Maybe for you it isn’t a saxophone and you don’t drop the names of songs and musicians, but still pray, “Lord make me an instrument.”

Being such an instrument has everything to do with leadership in the church. As you become your instrument, think of yourself also as leader of a jazz combo. A leader sets the tone of the music, the tempo, decides theme and direction for a gig in consultation with the other band members.

The late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, once chief rabbi for the United Kingdom, wrote in his book, Lessons in Leadership, a book using Torah portions to reflect on leadership: “Leadership in Judaism is a counterpoint, a musical form defined as ‘the technique of combining two or more melodic lines in such a way that they establish a harmonic relationship while retaining their linear individuality’” (Nook, 123). Ron Heifetz, in his essay “Leadership in a Permanent Crisis” offers these thoughts on leadership: “People clamor for direction, while you are faced with a way forward that isn’t at all obvious. Twists and turns are the only certainty. Yet you still have to lead.... In this context, leadership is an improvisational and experimental art.”

Lord make me an instrument. Lord help me lead musically, setting the tone and tempo and direction while also bringing out the voices of the other instruments in this group, all so we can sing God’s praises and hosannas to Jesus. Such leadership is an improvisational art in the world in which we live and minister. This world is helpfully described with the acronym VUCA – volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous. Healthy leadership in a VUCA world can also use that acronym: leadership focused on vision, understanding, courage and adaptability. Such leadership is contrapuntal – using counterpoint, playing the instrument you are while encouraging the voices of every other instrument. Such leadership is improvisational, rooted in the core melody of the gospel of Jesus Christ while allowing for creative expression and playful experimentation.

This kind of leadership where you are an instrument is both about skill development and about personhood.

Skills. Some of the best current human resources thinking encourages developing job descriptions and requirements around KSAPs or KSAOs – the first three letters standing for knowledges, skills and abilities. Every ministry setting where you are being sent to lead will ask that you have a certain knowledge base, certain skills and certain abilities. What do you need to know? What will you need to do? What are your capabilities? For all licensed, commission and ordained clergy, you need to have some knowledge of our Scriptures, of the history of the church including the history of Methodism, of theology including theology in the Wesleyan tradition. If you are appointed as a pastor, you need skills in preaching, worship design and leadership, teaching, pastoral care, leading meetings and groups. In other ministry settings, some of the skills may be a bit different. We expect skills at a certain level of competency, and we look for capabilities, the capacity to learn and grow both beyond a minimum competency and to learn new things.

When I have thought about an ideal model for continuing education and professional development, I would break it into three parts. One, do things that just feed your soul. Good preachers enjoy preaching conferences. Some of us would enjoy a week with a creative theologian. Two, do things to address areas that need development. Take serious feedback seriously and respond by developing those areas that are not as strong as you would like them to be. In encouraging our clergy to take serious feedback seriously, I am also inviting all of us, laity and clergy alike, to do the work to create a culture of constructive feedback in our ministry settings. An anonymous note slipped under the office door does not constitute serious

feedback. Three, learn new things. The list of skills needed when I began in ministry was different. My first office had a mimeograph machine and a typewriter. Continue to grow strength and joy areas, work on areas for increased competence, learn new skills, gain new knowledge, grow new capabilities. Be life-long learners.

Jazz musicians are able to improvise because they know the basics of their instruments and can play them well. To lead in this liminal time requires improvisation. All we may be able to promise are twists and turns. But people won't follow if we don't demonstrate basic competence. Tod Bolsinger argues that no one will follow you off the map unless they trust you on the map (Canoeing the Mountains). Technical competence is required. Ron Heifetz makes a similar point in his essay when he writes: leaders "must develop 'next practices' while excelling at today's best practices." To lead people on an improvisational journey, they need to know you can play the basics.

And leadership asks more than knowledge, skills and abilities. KSAP – the letter P stands for "personality" or "personal characteristics." KSAO – the letter O stands for "other characteristics." We bring who we are to the task of ministry. We must bring who we are to the task of ministry. 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. Lord, make **me** an instrument. My whole being is involved in this, and my whole self is important to who I am as a leader. Who I am is not subsumed by who I am as a clergy person, but I want to bring the full range of myself to my ministry.

Kent Nerburn: "We are the reed through which the breath of God is blown, the strings on which the music of God is played.... If we humbly accept our part as a gift and play it well,

we will have done our small part to help create the symphony of God's voice." (p.9). We want to be the kind of people who in our ministry and leadership help create the symphony of God's voice, being our best, bringing out the best in others.

Matt Bloom, in Flourishing in Ministry describes several key activities of pastoral ministry, and I recognize that there are other ministry settings that involve different activities: "activities such as preaching, leading worship, pastoral care and teaching are core features. Pastors are able to create better alignment when the 'personalize' these core features" (14). Bringing who we are to ministry contributes to our well-being and to flourishing in ministry.

When Bishop Sally Dyck was first elected and assigned to Minnesota as bishop, she encouraged all the clergy in the conference to ponder and pray about leadership, and invited us to read daily Romans 12. When you read Romans 12 it is all about being transformed by God's Spirit. It is about developing love, mutual affection, resilience, hope, patience. It is about being shaped, formed, and about being community together. We are not only who we are as a clergy persons, yet who we are is intimately intertwined with who we are as a clergy persons. Lord, make us instruments.

So let me encourage you to develop the "you" side of being an instrument – maybe a saxophone or a flute or a trumpet or a guitar or a drum or a violin. Let me do this rather briefly in reference to three wonderful saxophone songs. There really should be soundtrack cds available following this worship service.

A jazz classic recognized by the Library of Congress, Coleman Hawkins 1939 performance of "Body and Soul" shows a musician creatively offering one musical idea after another in a series of saxophone choruses. Body and soul. Take care of yourselves, body and



soul. Tend to your health, your wellness. “Wellness is about a healthy body and mind; wellbeing is about a flourishing life” (Matt Bloom, 2). The two are interconnected. Care for yourself. Tend to your most significant relationships. It is part of being the instrument God desires you to be.

If you have never heard what John Coltrane does with “My Favorite Things” I commend it to you. I also commend to you taking time for some of your favorite things – music, reading, walking, painting, gardening, athletics, knitting – whatever your favorite things, find time for them. They remind you that who you are is not just who you are as a clergy person.

The leader of the jazz combo introduces his next song: “Sometimes we’re not prepared for adversity. When it happens, sometimes we’re caught short. We don’t exactly know how to handle it when it comes up. Sometimes we don’t know just what to do when adversity takes over. And I have advice for all of us. I got it from my pianist Joe Zawinul who wrote this tune, and it sounds like what you’re supposed to say when you have that kind of problem. It’s called ‘Mercy, Mercy, Mercy.’” The saxophonist was Cannonball Adderly and the song, “Mercy, Mercy, Mercy. Mercy.” “There’s a wideness in God’s mercy like the wideness of the sea; there’s a kindness in God’s justice, which is more than liberty. For the love of God is broader than the measure of our mind; and the heart of the Eternal is most wonderfully kind.” (Hymn 121)

Keep your relationship with God in Jesus Christ lively and fresh. Splash around in the wideness of God’s grace and mercy. Let the waters in the well of your spirituality be replenished often. You need it for ministry, and you need it for you. We need the grace and

mercy of God. Growing in it is a life-long adventure. We need the grace and mercy of God because leadership is challenging and we will not always get it right.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote, “the reason leaders... cannot avoid making mistakes is that there is no textbook that infallibly teaches how to lead” (144). Ron Heifetz again: “In this context, leadership is an improvisational and experimental art. The art of leadership in today’s world involves orchestrating the inevitable conflict, chaos, and confusion of change so that the disturbance is productive rather than destructive.” Mercy, mercy, mercy.

Lord, make me an instrument. Lord make us instruments. Give us the grace to lead as we allow your Spirit to blow through us with power and energy and beauty and wonder and mystery and awe and love. As we become the instruments you would have us be, hone our improvisational skills so that together our faith communities may play beautiful music together and thus create the symphony of your voice. All to your glory, O God.

The writer Albert Murray once said of jazz, “it is the creative process incarnate.” Lord, make us instruments to incarnate your creativity in a world that needs your creativity, your mercy, your energy, your love.

The jazz musician Branford Marsalis once said, “if jazz ain’t about hope and love, what is?” Friends, we are. We are. Lord, make us instruments to make it so. Amen.