

With deep appreciation to The Rev. Whitney Rice who kindly agreed to let me adapt portions of a sermon she preached at the ordination to the Priesthood of The Rev. Nancy Woodworth-Hill on August 1, 2015. St Paul's, Jeffersonville.

**14th Sunday after Pentecost: Jeremiah 31:31-34; Revelation 22:1-5; John 1:1-8
August 30, 2015**



I've decided to take this opportunity here in the out-of-doors at our annual Breakfast at the Shore for a bit of "true confessions". Please indulge me as I tell you a few things about my misspent youth. And, really, there is a point I hope to make that expands what I say beyond my own experience into something that may resonate with you.

Anyway, in my younger and badly behaved days, I ran wild and did the following things which I really should have thought through a little more carefully: I got a tattoo, I drank too much and danced on the roof of my dorm, I kissed on the first date, I bought a motorcycle, I wore a miniskirt and a tube top to a job interview, and I got ordained to the priesthood.

Actually, none of those are true save the last. And it is, without a doubt, the most reckless one. In fact, I've lived a disappointingly well-behaved and boring life. No tattoos, no public drunkenness, no motorcycle, no minimalist fashion at job interviews. So you might wonder why I would haul off and do the craziest thing on that list.

Getting ordained really is reckless and irresponsible behavior. Remember when Jesus asks, "Which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost?" Well, I bet you that anyone you come across who wears a collar failed to do exactly that. We have to do it that way, because if we **really** understood what ordained life would demand of us, and if we really asked if we were worthy and able to bear the great sacred trust handed over to us by the people for whom we are to care, we'd never be arrogant enough to do it.

All of us – lay or ordained- at some point in our spiritual journeys discover that we don't really have what it takes to be disciples. We can't earn or force our way into sainthood on our own. So then some of us say to ourselves, "Maybe I can do better and be better if I get ordained. That's it! Then it will be my full time job to learn how to be a better Christian! Maybe now I'll really start serving people and caring for the poor and living as Jesus would ask of me." Well, I've been in this ordained ministry gig for seven years now, and I for one am not one more ounce noble or giving than I was when I took my vows. **Dang it!**

So why do we do it? Why do we take the plunge and make these vows when we know in our hearts of hearts that it's going to be tough and it's going to be demanding and we're probably not going to be very good at it a great deal of the time? I'll tell you what I think. I think clergy are romantics. Even the sternest, crustiest, most WASPy old man priest you can think of—he stood in front of his community one day and bared his heart to the world, admitting that he had so fallen in love with God and with God's people that he had to devote his life to them. That's what we're all –lay and ordained- doing here today. It is that tender and painful and beautiful truth-filled jumping-off-of-a-cliff moment that we are here to witness and support each other as we strive to be the type of disciples that Jesus calls us to be.

And before you lecture me about essentially running off and having a Vegas wedding with God and God's people, let me tell you something: **God started it.** That's right- **God started it, so there!**

We see that right in our scripture from Jeremiah today. And it begins in a place of failure. Israel broke the covenant God had made with them when God had rescued them from Egypt. How many times have we broken our baptismal vows? How many times have we failed to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves? We begin the journey of transformation amid a mess of our own making. Any call to new ministry, lay or ordained, must begin with a straightforward acknowledgement of our own lack. We must acknowledge as best as we are able, what the cost to build that tower is, know that we cannot build it on our own, and yet decide to go forward, trusting in God that we will learn and we will be equipped to do what God calls us to do.

God's response to our naiveté and failure is not to say, "Well, maybe we'd better scale things down a bit." God's response to our breaking of our promises is to say, "I want to be closer to you than ever." "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts," God says. God found a whole group of us who couldn't fulfill our baptismal promises and said, "Oh by the way, even though you couldn't keep the earlier promises, now I'm going to call you to an additional set of promises. This time you're going to promise to be diligent in the reading and study of the Holy Scriptures, to live more fully and deeply into the ministry I have called you to and you will be a wholesome example to your people! *Good luck, have fun!*"

Each of here, by being baptized has said yes. Each of us here, by being part of this community, has said yes. What you have essentially agreed to is heart surgery, probably without anesthetic. You have agreed to God writing God's law on your heart, a strange, messy, intimate and probably painful endeavor that will continue to mold and change you far past what you can imagine now, even with the great wisdom you already possess. This heart surgery is what anyone who opens herself to becoming fully a vessel of grace agrees to, lay or ordained, and it takes the rest of our lives. When you say, "Yes, God, use me for the building up of the Kingdom," God gets out the bone saw and gets to work.

Again with the things I would never have agreed to if I fully understood them before I said yes. This transformation - a lifelong conversion if you will- requires us to say yes every day to that often painful change. Most of my days consist of trying to rebuild the clean, cold, hard little box

of pride and blindness that my heart is in its ungospelled state, and then every now and again God catches me off guard and gets in to start carving me up again. God never seems to give up hope of hammering away at my defenses long enough to let some light and warmth and truth in. So really our baptismal vows are very much like marriage vows, in the sense that we are going to get it down in writing and say it out loud in front of all these people that we are going to stick it out when it hurts, because God and God's people are worth it. Those of you who are married know the skill and commitment and creativity it takes to sustain the romance when the honeymoon is over. Each of us gathered here has agreed to stand witness to and for each other. We have agreed to affirm and support and uphold that reality of each other.

Ministry, both lay and ordained, is essentially a torrid romance with God and God's people, and like any love story, it is full of adventure and surprise and passion and joy. What buttoned-up proper Anglican clergy don't want to admit to you is that secretly they love the drama and intensity of being one half of a pair of star-crossed lovers. The other half, the faith community as manifested through Jesus Christ, is far more sensible than we are. But we can't help ourselves, we are made so reckless by our love that in a shocking lack of inhibition, we get up in a liturgy like today's and say, "I am all in for the rest of my life and I don't care who knows it!" When we pass the peace to each other at the hinge of our service- moving from the liturgy of the word to the liturgy of the table, we remind each person we encounter that we see Christ in them, and they in us- and we can do no other than strive to be someone who affirms and welcomes and supports that other person.

But like any romance that burns this hot, that causes us to turn our whole lives over to something outside ourselves, when it is good, it is so, so good, and when it is bad, it is horrid. What the fine print in the baptismal vows says is that because we have agreed to let God write God's law on our hearts, to carve us up and break us down and rewrite our very souls, we are agreeing for the rest of our lives to be brokenhearted. We are agreeing to be broken open every day by the beauty and pain and wonder that is the community of faith entrusted to our care and the work God calls us to do together.

What could possibly make us agree to have our hearts broken every day for the rest of our lives? What kind of life is that? I'll tell you: it is the life of God. The reason we rush with abandon to commit to being brokenhearted forever is because God did it first. God admits it in our lesson from Jeremiah. "This didn't work out the first time," God says. "You broke my heart. So here it is again. Here is my heart. I want to be in covenant with you so badly that I'm giving myself to you fully, without restraint."

God knew what was going to happen. God knew God's people would break God's heart again. And once again, God's response was to be even more vulnerable, this time sending God's only Son. Jesus was God's unprotected beating heart walking around in the world. And Jesus gave himself to be broken for us, because his love for us was so great that he simply could do nothing else. We were – and we are- worth all his strength and all his faith and all his pain and all his hope.

When we see God radiant with joy at living this devoted life which gets God's heart broken over and over again, when we see Jesus responding to his unrequited love for us with resurrection,

how can we doubt that the heartbreaking life of discipleship is the truth of our destiny and the deepest desire of our being? Handing our hearts over to God and saying, “Yes, God, carve yourself into my heart, tear it up and break it down and leave me broken open and pulsing with life and love and joy and pain,” is the secret raging emotion and risk that is taking place behind the formal words that we say in this liturgy today.

If your reckless Vegas wedding with God and God’s people happened many years ago, lay or ordained, remember it and renew it today. If you are still sitting in your Midwestern town with your heart safe and cold and whole and responsible, come on out to Vegas with me and others who have given our lives over to God, risking all that we are in hopes of finding that relationship that fills the hole in our heart. If like many of us, you’re somewhere between the two, thinking fondly of your elopement with God but admitting things have drifted rather toward discussions of retirement plans and homeowner’s insurance, let your heart be broken open again. God is still as hot as ever, burning and longing and yearning for union with you, reckless and irresponsible with passion, giving everything of Godself away and caring nothing for the future or the cost.

This is the richness of the brokenhearted bliss that is the life of love, the brokenhearted bliss that is the life of God. I’m scared to do it. I’m scared every day. But that’s really why I’m here today, why we’re all here today—we can only find the courage to answer God’s joyful broken heart with our own if we do it together. I don’t know if the founders of St. John’s envisioned the sanctuary as a tacky Vegas wedding chapel, but we’ve all showed up here today: God and us, the brokenhearted heartbreakers. Let’s get hitched! **Amen.**