

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
10/31/2010 Reformation Sunday
Jeremiah 31:31-34, Romans 3:19-28, John 8:31-36
Sermon preached at United Lutheran Church, The Wartburg, Mount Vernon, NY
For the Twenty-fifth Anniversary of Pastor Carol Fryer's Ordination

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Bishop Rimbo, Reverend Clergy, dear people of United Lutheran Church and of The Wartburg, friends, family, and one dear pastor in particular, my beloved wife, Carol, I greet you all in the name of our Savior Jesus Christ.

The occasion of the anniversary of an ordination is a happy chance to give thanks to God for the holy ministry of Word and Sacrament. It is a sacred office designed to make us friends of God. It is a holy ministry aimed like an arrow toward our hearts, to write something there, and, in the writing, to make us better people.

My text, then, is from our First Lesson, from Jeremiah Chapter 31. Through the prophet Jeremiah, the Lord gives this tremendous promise to a discouraged people:

But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law *within them*, and I will *write it upon their hearts*; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. (Jeremiah 31:33, RSV)

This writing of the law of God upon the human heart has already commenced. Many of you have experienced it here in this lovely church. I bet you have already felt your heart warmed and strengthened by this divine inscribing, so that many a Sunday you have left church thinking to yourself, I feel stronger, I feel comforted, I mean to live a bit better this week because of what I have heard.

Carol contributes to the writing of God's Law upon our hearts by way of her proclamation of the holy Gospel in Word and Sacrament. She has preached to you of Jesus, according to that old rule of preaching, "Preach Christ, else remain silent." Dolores and John have done the same thing for you, as have Chaplains before them. But if you would please indulge a proud husband a bit, I mean to speak especially of Carol as I go along in this sermon.

This is Reformation Sunday, and so let me begin by referring to a scene in the life of young Martin Luther. This is a scene lifted up in both of the major Luther movies -- the good, old black and white one from the 1950s and the more recent movie starring Joseph Fiennes. Luther is an earnest young monk in the monastery at Erfurt. Because of his piety and his education, it was natural that he should be

ordained a priest. He has worked his way through the necessary steps.¹ Luther was ordained a subdeacon in the fall of 1506, a deacon on February 27, and a priest on April 3, 1507. Now is the time for his first mass. He is twenty-three years old.

It is a festival mass. His father, Hans, brought twenty guests and contributed twenty gulden to the monastery -- a right tidy sum. There were gifts for the young priest. Dear friends and relatives are there.

Luther was not easy in his mind about this mass. He worried very much over his worthiness to celebrate mass. He worried too whether he could celebrate the mass without error.

And as it turned out, he did falter. Indeed, he faltered so severely that he wanted to run away from the altar, and he told this to the prior or the novice master at his side. But that more seasoned priest ordered him to continue.

The monastery there at Erfurt emphasized that the consecration of the Eucharistic elements should be spoken correctly, without a wandering mind, and without hesitation. But Luther hesitated. A great fear had overcome him. He was suddenly struck by the reality that he was in the very presence of God, and it undid him.

As the years went by and as Luther grew in his evangelical thinking, he took to heart that Christ is above all our *Saviour*, and so his terror at the Holy Communion subsided. And we can be grateful for that.

Still, there is something right about young Luther's dismay at being in the presence of Christ. There is something Biblical about it. It is akin to that holy fear that came upon Isaiah of old when he was permitted a vision of God. He saw the Lord's train fill the Temple. He beheld the six-winged seraphim. He heard them calling to one another, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts. The whole earth is full of his glory." He saw the lintels shake and the smoke filling the house. We will sing about these things in the magnificent Sanctus later in the liturgy. Then Isaiah cried out:

Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts. (Isaiah 6:5, KJV)

And so it is that we arrive at my theme for this sermon. I have three points. First, the Blessed Sacrament and Holy Ministry in general is worthy of the kind of awe that Luther felt and Isaiah felt long before him. Perhaps the ministry of the Gospel does not require the terror that Luther felt as a young priest, but it does invite awe that God should be so good to us as to speak words of salvation to us. Second, it is an astonishing and humbling thing that every pastor knows and feels,

¹ His great modern biographer, Martin Brecht, tells the story: Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation, 1483-1521*. Volume one of three. Translated by James L. Schaaf (Fortress Press: Minneapolis. 1981, with English translation copyright 1985), pages 70-76.

that almighty God is willing to use us “earthen vessels,” as St. Paul called himself, to proclaim the Gospel. And third, in ordaining and calling Pastor Carol Fryer, our good Lord has chosen a very lovely earthen vessel indeed!

So, first, let us speak of the majesty of God. Every preacher and every presider at the sacraments knows that we speak for a majestic God. Psalm 29, for example, gives us words for expressing the wonder of the thing, that we preachers, with our weak voices, should try to speak for our magnificent Maker of heaven and earth:

²Give unto the LORD the glory due unto his name; worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness.

³The voice of the LORD is upon the waters: the God of glory thundereth: the LORD is upon many waters.

⁴The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is full of majesty.

⁵The voice of the LORD breaketh the cedars; yea, the LORD breaketh the cedars of Lebanon. (Psalm 29:2-5, KJV)

Preachers of old² have had fun trying to imagine the delight that swept through heaven when the blessed rumor first began to circulate -- the rumor of Christmas! “Have you heard?” one angel calls to another. “Have you heard the astonishing news, the news about the only-begotten Son? He is off to earth, to be born in a stable. It is the will of all three of Them, of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They mean for the One we adore and about whom we are glad to sing hosannas day and night, they mean for him to be born a human. Aye, and not to be born a human for a day or for a year or for thirty-three years, but henceforth, ages upon ages, world without end. He is off to do this thing, because he loves humanity so very much. They all do! Our majestic God, who fashioned the whole universe, for whom no task is too big, has such big love for humanity that the Son is on his way to be born in a village called Bethlehem.”

And so the joy and wonder in heaven continues and splashes right over onto earth on that first Christmas, so that we hear the heavenly host singing,

Glory to God in the highest, and peace to his people on earth! (Luke 2:14)

When thinking of the holy Gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ ponder nothing small-minded. The one who holds the universe in his hands was willing to be held in the arms of a village maid named Mary. And Luther was right to be

² I recall that Charles Spurgeon, for example, in one of his Christmas sermons imagined heaven’s delight at the divine incarnation.

awestruck when he stood at his first Mass and trembled, for he stood in the presence of a mighty and wondrous love.

We will be doing well, then, when we sing our Communion hymn in a few minutes from now:

Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence (LBW 198)

- 1 Let all mortal flesh keep silence,
and with fear and trembling stand;
ponder nothing earthly-minded,
for with blessing in his hand
Christ our God to earth descending
comes our homage to demand.
- 2 King of kings, yet born of Mary,
as of old on earth he stood,
Lord of lords in human vesture,
in the body and the blood,
he will give to all the faithful
his own self for heav'nly food.
- 3 Rank on rank the host of heaven
spreads its vanguard on the way;
as the Light of light, descending
from the realms of endless day,
comes, the pow'rs of hell to vanquish,
as the darkness clears away.
- 4 At his feet the six-winged seraph,
cherubim with sleepless eye,
veil their faces to the presence,
as with ceaseless voice they cry:
"Alleluia! Alleluia!
Alleluia, Lord Most High!"

Text: Liturgy of St. James; tr. Gerard Moultrie, 1829-1885, alt.

So, that is the first theme: We worship a majestic God!

My second theme is this: Wonders of wonders, this Majestic God is willing to use mere people, mere earthen vessels, to speak on his behalf. It is as St. Paul exclaims:

⁵For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with

ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. ⁶For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. ⁷But we have this treasure *in earthen vessels*, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us. (2 Corinthians 4:5-7, RSV)

Every pastor who hears a private confession or enters into pastoral counseling is deeply aware that we are simply earthen vessels. Luther's sacristy prayer rings true for many clergy:

Lord God, You have appointed me as a Bishop and Pastor in your Church, but you see how unsuited I am to meet so great and difficult a task. If I had lacked your help, I would have ruined everything long ago. Therefore, I call upon you: I wish to devote my mouth and my heart to you; I shall teach the people. I myself will learn and ponder diligently upon your Word. Use me as your instrument -- but do not forsake me, for if ever I should be on my own, I would easily wreck it all.³

I will never forget my seminary intern supervisor, dear Pastor Dick Geib. I was chatting with him in his office one day when he paused to receive a phone call from a former parishioner from down south. It was a heart-breaking matter -- a matter of an end-of-life decision. It seemed to me that Pastor Geib spoke well and wisely to the woman. When the conversation was done, he looked up at me with his great, sad eyes, and said, "I have reason at the end of every day to approach the throne of grace and beg for mercy on my ministry."

Many a pastor can say Amen to that. When we hear a confession or offer pastoral counsel, we are deeply aware that we are not saints, we are not geniuses, we are not detectives or psychologists skilled at detecting dodges or deceit. We are simply earthen vessels, clay pots, yet our majestic Jesus has entrusted his word to us, with the astonishing promise:

¹⁸Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. (Matthew 18:18, RSV)

But it appears to be the definite will and pleasure of God to use lowly ones like you and me to build his kingdom. And so we can join the stunning cry of St. Paul who marvels at God's willingness to deal with the lowly:

²⁶Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of

³ <http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/prayers/sacristy.txt>

noble birth. ²⁷But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, ²⁹so that no one might boast in the presence of God. ³⁰He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption (1 Corinthians 1:26-30, NRSV)

Let me hasten on to part that is especially fun for me, my third theme: When our majestic God chose Carol to be a pastor, he chose a lovely earthen vessel indeed!

First off, I cannot help myself from pointing out to you the grace with which she does the liturgy. She never condemns us more clumsy ministers for the workmanlike way in which we preside over the liturgy. And she herself never brags, nor even seems to sense the beauty of her own presiding. But mercy! Have you seen her liturgical gestures, with her long slender hands and every gesture helping to illumine the meaning of the sacred text?

I once read a sports column about the legendary golfer Jack Nicholas. The sportswriter was talking about Nicholas's concentration as he prepared to putt, and he said that he figured a gun could go off right beside Nicholas, and he would not even notice. That's how it is with Carol. When she presides at the liturgy, she does so with ardent devotion.

But the beauty of her movements hardly approaches the beauty of her pastoral heart. She loves you people. She has always loved the people entrusted to her, from our first parish in south York County, Pennsylvania, to Saint Peter's Church in New York City, and now to United Lutheran Church and the people and staff of The Wartburg.

Lutheran clergy here in the Metro New York region are used to be addressed as "Father." We tend to dress in black suits and clergy collars and so strangers sometimes take us to be Catholic clergy. It happens so often, that many of us hardly even notice it any more.

Well, it would be right for the world to address Carol as "Mother," for she has a deep motherly heart toward everyone.

Our friend Pastor Mel Dick recently reminded me of a story from long ago, from the days when our son Sam was just an infant. Carol was set to serve in a liturgy in the Chapel at the Gettysburg Seminary. Maybe I was serving in that liturgy too, because I was not available to take charge of Sam. So Carol simply plopped Sam down in Mel's lap, along with a children's book, and went off to play her role in the liturgy. Mel said that the children's book was book about animals, and as Mel would turn the pages, Sam would point and say "Mommy." "Yes, Sam, that is a mommy giraffe." "Yes, Sam, that is a mommy zebra." "Yes, Sam, that is a mommy antelope." And Mel thought to himself, "Hmmm, this boy loves his mommy!" Well, we all love this mother in the Lord, Pastor Carol Fryer, now don't we!

And she is fun and adventurous. When she had a chance to go to Africa, she did not hesitate. She served in the Northwestern Diocese of the Lutheran Church in Tanzania for six weeks and she return later for a second trip.

And let me share a secret with you: Carol's sense of adventure includes a kind of fearlessness about heights. So yonder medallions, high above the organ, on the ceiling of this beautiful chapel: they were re-painted recently by Carol. She stood on the top of the scaffold, tilting her face back some from the ceiling, and brightened up those medallions while she had the chance, while the scaffold was up for the repair of your tracker organ.

And being a pastor is not a part-time thing for Carol. We have been married now for twenty-eight years, and she has been married both to me and to the Church all that time. It is a daily joy for us to be a clergy couple. We discuss theology and ministry all the time, much to my blessing as a parish pastor.

And let me end my praise of this lovely earthen vessel by returning to where I began this sermon. Carol is a writer upon your hearts. She is a divine scribe. She begins the writing of the divine law on your heart by speaking of Jesus in such a way as to contend with fear, for fear holds us back from goodness. Jesus says, Pray for your enemy, but we fear to do it. We fear that we need to defeat our enemy, not pray for that fellow. Jesus says, Do not be anxious, but we lift our eyes and see threats all around, and so we are anxious nonetheless. And very reasonably so if Jesus be not risen and not at our side. But if he is at our side, then we have reason for courage and goodness that we did not have before.

And that's what Carol preaches to you. She preaches that Christ lives and is at your side, and that therefore we can afford to turn to the path of love as is right for us and is so very needful for our world. Christ has triumphed over sin, death, and the devil. He has set us free from those awful fellows. Let us then use our freedom to the benefit of our neighbors and to the honor of his name, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.