

**December 2, 2006: General Ordinations, Grace Cathedral**  
**Ezekiel 34:11-16**  
**2 Timothy 4: 1 - 8**  
**John 21: 15 – 19**

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Today, in this sacred space, 20 individual journeys in faith and formation converge. Once this intense time together ends, these 20 journeys will continue, scattered into ordained ministry across this and other dioceses.

Each of these journeys began with a question. It was either the ordinand's own question or one put by a friend, mentor, or that strange woman in the congregation who seems to pull incisive words out of thin air. Could it be that you are called into a distinctive way of leading, living, and serving in this fragile community of faith we all share?

To respond to the question, each of you here today stepped on to a path littered with questions. At times it probably crossed your mind that the church has confused discernment with interrogation. At least one of you told me that the need to tell your story yet one more time became the molehill that, for a moment, suddenly became an insurmountable mountain. And, if you hadn't noticed already, Bishop Marc will put still more questions to you before his Episcopal hands descend on your head in the ancient sign of grace invoked.

And then the questions cease.

Or do they?

As we just heard the deacon proclaim, this was certainly not Peter's experience.

Just call to mind Peter's journey.

At a moment's bidding he dropped livelihood, family, and the certainty of life under the law to follow an itinerant holy man – not quite Rabbi, not quite revolutionary, the self-named Son of Man evoking a radical renewal of God's reign, a powerful, yet unexpected embodiment of Good News.

Once on the road we hear of one mis-step after another – such that Peter is often seen as the stand-in for all of us as we fumble with our own encounter with the Jesus who entralls us, engages us, offends us, puzzles us and yet we can't let him go. Peter tries to walk on water only to sink in fear. He refuses to have his feet washed and then demands a bath. Within hours he glibly denies the One who changed his life forever. He flees from the ignominy of the crucifixion and is at first unbelieving and then bewildered at the resurrection.

And then what? He doesn't know. So he goes back to the only thing he *does* know – fishing for fish. Basic food, basic livelihood. Perhaps all the while ruefully ruminating on his life changed – but for what?

And then one more world turning event – the risen Jesus on the beach inviting him to a meal. It has somehow all come together. What a transcendent moment. A moment full of resolution and promise.

And then – the questions.

Oh, thinks Peter, not now? Why now? And what a question.

Do you love me?

What do you mean? How could you ask? Of course I love you.

Do you love me?

And again,

Do you love me?

It must have been heartbreaking.

And that, I think, was the point.

We can safely say that the risen Jesus was not, in the words of today's pop psychology, a needy person. In his repeated question he was not seeking assurance out of his insecurity. He was seeking, one last time, to give Peter, all the disciples, all of us, the final encouragement for the transformed journey into radical and power-dismantling newness. On the beach, Jesus' persistent question evokes the thing they, we most need – a broken heart.

Jesus' response to Peter's protestations was of little comfort. Feed my sheep, care for my lambs, find my lost ones, my scattered and injured ones, my frightened ones, my vulnerable, marginalized, lonely ones. Such a command can only be lived as a life in ministry with a broken heart and with a heart on fire.

Today the church which ordains you to serve and lead needs the gifts of the heartbroken, of those deeply in love. Or else we will all fall into the busy work of building walls around our own hearts to stave off the pain, the need, the outrageous injustice, the decimation of the fragile world God breathed into being.

At the pre-ordination retreat at the Bishop's Ranch we spoke of spiritual risk. The greatest risk in ordained ministry is the hardened heart, the quenching of the heart's fire of love and compassion. And the temptation to harden our hearts surrounds us on all sides in cynicism, dismissive humor, settling for the innocuous, despair – it's all too much; what can one do?, and mere self absorbed busyness.

When I hear Jesus incessant question – do you love me? – perhaps like you, I recall the dialog song from *Fiddler on the Roof*. Rebe Tevia is completely thrown by his daughters' opting to marry for love rather than through arrangement. He turns to the wife of his own arranged union to ask the question. "Do you love me?"

Her responses, puzzled and hurt, resentful and afraid, relate over and over, things done, tasks performed, patient endurance, but she was unable or unwilling to say the simple words, 'yes, I love you.'

Jesus' question to Peter will be Jesus daily question to each of you, our 20 ordinands, now and forever. Jesus, however you regard him, will persistently ask, "Do you love me?"

Beware of falling into the litany of Tevia's wife.

Do you love me?

--but I attended 10 straight years of vestry meetings; why do you ask?

Do you love me?

--look, I personally stock our food pantry every week; why do you ask?

Do you love me?

--I ran a hugely successful capital campaign; why do you ask?

Do you love me?

-- I work my fingers to the bone in doing outreach for this parish; why do you ask?

Do you love me?

--Hey; I was called to three congregations, each successively larger than the last; why do you ask?

These are just cartoonish examples of the answers of the hardening heart, the dimming fire.

Why is, "do you love me?" the ultimate question, the one that the risen Jesus leaves with Peter on the beach and with us every day?

Because only broken hearts, hearts on fire, can give the sustenance, the endurance, to feed the anxious flock. And feed us with what? Not easy answers, not affirmation of a well earned lifestyle, not the treadmill of institution maintenance, but, as Ezekiel puts before us this day, to feed us justice.

Now justice is potent dish, not best served up in righteousness or anger but with the urgent compassion of the broken heart. Justice is not a meal sauced with guilt but is rather an invitation to be free: free of all

that possession and privilege burdens us with, liberating us all to bring the blessed reign of the Holy One near, alive, and vital.

Today's ordinands are being empowered for a church that is at the tipping point between self-absorbed fractiousness and a time of transformed lives and Good News made real, tangible, immediate.

Last summer The Episcopal Church finally and fully embraced the Millennium Development Goals. Our young people are alive with global consciousness and deep concern about how badly abused is the world we will hand on to them. Energy is rising for us all to move out the doors of the church into possibility rather than fear. We are poised, this no-account, declining mainstream church, to become a catalyst for God's Holy Reign realized.

Our new Presiding Bishop sums this up as a call to deeds based evangelism. How are we going to do that? Well, you whom we ordain today, will lead us, you will show us, you will feed us with the Spirit that engenders acts of justice and compassion—sustained by your hearts, broken and on fire.

Jesus asks, "do you love me?"

If you do, only if you do, can you, will you, must you feed people hungry for the solid food of justice, compassion, and transformation.

It's so exciting. It can be so exhausting. It is only possible when we live from hearts broken, hearts on fire.

AMEN

Will the following to be ordained priest please stand.

The church is and will be so blest by your gifts. God's people await your presbyteral leadership. As Bishop Marc said at the Ranch, 'don't be afraid.' Lead us where we need to go. Keep your love affair with the Holy One alive, supple, and aflame.

Will the following to be ordained deacon please rise as I call your name.

The church is and will be so blest by your gifts. You stand ready to animate the promises of the Baptismal Covenant in and for all of God's people. Draw us into the exciting work of justice and compassion. Don't weary in the constant explaining of who you are. Keep your love affair with the Holy One alive, supple, and aflame.

To all of us here present, let us do all in our power to embrace all that these extraordinary people bring to us, and let us stop tempting them to harden their hearts and quench the heart's flame that is their gift to us.

AMEN