

**Sermon for Ordination to the Priesthood: William Bouvel and Barnabas Pusnur**  
**St. James Episcopal Cathedral, Chicago, IL**  
**June 25, 2022**  
**The Rev. Dr. Roger Ferlo**

I suspect that many of us here this morning have never taken part in this ceremony. Some of us, though, are old hands at this—hands that will be put to dramatic use in a few minutes, as the priests in this room will gather around the bishop, and with her lay hands of the heads of two kneeling ordinands. If we do it right, Will and Barnabas will all but disappear under that sea of hands, which will be as it should be.

It will be as it should be because this ordination, in the end, is not about Barnabas and Will. It's not about us either—not the bishop, nor the bishop-elect, nor the priests and deacons assembled, not about even this congregation, which has so happily just assented to these strange proceedings.

No, this ordination is not about Will or Barnabas, nor about us. This ordination is about Jesus, the Good Shepherd of the flock, the Lamb who was slain: Jesus our great High Priest, the One who guides us with wounded hands. It's Christ's wounded hands that will rest on their heads this morning. The wounded hands of the crucified and resurrected One. The One who proclaimed the Good News, who cured every sickness. The One who had compassion. The One who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit—the Holy Spirit Who will be invoked in tremulous silence in this service, the Holy Spirit who dwells with us, in this cathedral, in this city.

Barnabas and Will are about to be ordained priest “for the meantime.” The meantime---the time the ancient writers described as the time between our Lord's ascension into heaven and his coming again in glory, a time that was for them a time of high anxiety, of joy and fear inextricably mixed “as we await the day of his coming”, in what the Scripture calls “these last days.” But in *these* days, here and now, let's be real. If these latter days are the Scriptural meantime, they are also a time of meanness, a *mean* time indeed. Violence and fear are rampant. Rhetoric is hot, and hatred is worn on the sleeve. Barnabas and Will are being ordained in a time when our nation is shadowed by war, sin, intolerance, fanaticism, and gun violence. They will serve in a divided country, where women and school children are in more danger today than they were yesterday. What's more, these two men are being ordained in a church too often at a loss to describe who we are and what we stand for in such times, and what we are supposed to do.

The more I attend these ordinations, the more I realize that we participate in ceremonies like this to protect ourselves—our fragile selves—against the meanness of the meantime. Will, Barnabas—we also gather here to protect *you*, to protect you as you draw nearer to the center of things, to the blinding truth of the world's deep sinfulness and to the equally blinding promise of the world's redemption. We are asking you to draw near with us to the center of things, where in the name of the Good Shepherd you will promise to be our guide. It's madness,

really. The vestments, the flowers, the bishop's staff. The long procession marched to that old tune. The solemn questions asked and answered, the solemn declaration proclaimed and signed, the solemn litany sung in stillness. All these our solemnities shield us from the sheer power of what we are about this morning. These rituals allow us to acknowledge in relative safety how fragile and exposed we are, not just in the face of the world's terrors, but also before the face of the Holy One who searches us out and knows us, who knows our sittings down and our risings up, the One who presses us both before and behind, the One who calls each of us by name.

Fragile and exposed, fragility and exposure—so often that is what God's service is all about. Fragility and exposure are what all of us have felt in these past years of pandemic and civil unrest: we feel "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." And the fragility and exposure we all feel before the terrors of this mean time are immeasurably heightened for people who submit themselves to ordination. So much is expected of clergy, and so often we priests feel—when we are honest with ourselves—that we have so little to give. It's ironic that the Episcopal Church ordains priests in the style of a coronation, as if the new priests were the reincarnation of King David or King Solomon. Let your priests be clothed with righteousness, we pray, let your faithful people sing for joy. The prayer this morning should really be this: Give these poor guys the wit to duck for cover.

That's why I thought it might be helpful for you to hear that first reading this morning, taken from the book of Numbers, of all places—not a book we often hear about in church. It's been a rough haul for Moses. Murmurings of dissent. A Golden Calf. Attempted mutiny. No promised land in sight. You and I would have given up long ago. But in the midst of this turmoil, the Lord said to Moses, "Gather me seventy of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and have them take their place with you. I will take some of the spirit that is on you and put it on them, and they shall bear the burden of the people along with you so that you will not bear it all by yourself."

"So that you will not bear it all by yourself." Thank God. As Moses learned the hard way, this leadership business can seem very lonely. The besetting sin of Episcopal priesthood is what can be called the Lone Ranger syndrome—anything you can do *I have* to do better, even when I know I can't. And to be frank, it's often our parishioners who reward us for this behavior, usually with the very best intentions, putting us on a pedestal that all too soon reveals its cracks and its faults. Talented, Type A personalities like Will and Barnabas are very good at taking on burdens. Just look at their resumes. But the tough job for them now will be learning to *share* the burdens, just as Moses learned to do.

So with Moses in mind, Will, Barnabas, I invite you to stand.

It is the tradition at these services to end the sermon with a formal charge to the ordinands. Here's my first piece of advice. Get a therapist. Or keep the one you have. And equally and even more important, get a spiritual advisor. Or keep one if you have one. By the way, neither of

these is your spouse. God knows they already have enough on their plates, waking up every morning to find themselves married to priests.

Next, do not fear. In the silence this morning, as your fellow priests surround you, as the prayers of this congregation lift you up in silent eloquence, do not fear. The Lord is near, even in these mean times. God has led you to this moment just as you are, because you *are* who you are. Here, in the center of the city, take your strength from the places and the people who have shaped you, whether here in Chicago or in Britain or in France or in India. Take courage from the people of St. Chrysostom's and Saint Paul and the Redeemer, from your beloved Fred and Reese, from your beloved Padma and Khushi. Take courage from all of us here gathered who have come to know and love you. We now seek to know God through your ministering hands. Your hands will break the bread and pour the wine, offer the healing touch, send out absolutions and blessings. We have faith that the Lord Jesus will guide you, He who proclaimed the Good News of the Reign of God, who had compassion, who was a healer, not a divider.

Be ready. God remains full of surprises, even for priests, As Paul once advised his church people in Philippi, rejoice in the Lord, always, and again I say rejoice, even in the most trying times. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. A hard task for priests, even for priests as gentle as you both are. You know there's trouble when the most popular continuing education course for parish priests is likely a seminar entitled "How to deal with difficult people." Be gentle with difficult people, and with yourselves.

Here's a Scriptural joke. Paul told his friends in Philippi not to not worry about anything. That makes you wonder what planet he came from. This is parish ministry we are talking about. Worry comes with the territory. But then, so does prayer. Remember to pray, especially in these meanest of times, knowing that the peace of God surpasses your own infinite capacity for worry.

Above all, stay with it. As Paul said to the Philippians, "Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in the Lord Jesus." This may seem obvious to you now, fresh in the ordained life. But remember that you are in it for the long haul. Five years, ten years, twenty years from now, you will need to remember Who brought you here, Who keeps you here, and Who calls you here by name. It will not always be easy to remember these things. You will need others to remind you. I am sure that in the coming years Fred and Padma will remind you about a lot of things. Listen to them.

Stay with it. Be ready. Rejoice. Be gentle. Do not fear. Who knows where the Shepherd will lead you next? In the meantime, know that the peace of God which passes all understanding, will guard your hearts in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Bishop, it's time.