

## We Are All Called to Ministry

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### Isaiah 6:1-8

*In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. <sup>2</sup>Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. <sup>3</sup>And one called to another and said:*

*'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;*

*the whole earth is full of his glory.'*

*<sup>4</sup>The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. <sup>5</sup>And I said: 'Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!'*

*<sup>6</sup>Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. <sup>7</sup>The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: 'Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.'<sup>8</sup> Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I; send me!'*

Like many middle school students, when I was in the seventh grade, I had it all figured out. And while some students in my class dreaded the assignment, I remember being very excited when Mr. Cackler told our class that we were going to write essays about what we would be doing in the future. As I said, I had it all figured out.

I was going to graduate from high school and go to Harvard where I was going to be a football star. After finishing my undergraduate degree I was going to attend Harvard Law and become a big-shot lawyer and make lots and lots of money. With that money I was going to build an enormous house that had a swimming pool, ample storage for my many cars, and spacious grounds for all of my horses. I don't think I ever knew what kind of law I was going to practice, but other than that, I'd say I had it all figured out!

Shortly after my seventh grade year ended my dad and his dad and I loaded up and headed to Red Bird Mission in Kentucky. While at Red Bird I had a fantastic time!

As we worked to help a family in need that week, I remember being struck by the

humbling act of serving others. I remember being struck by the beauty and the majesty of God's creation. I remember being struck by the hospitality and generosity of those who we had gone to serve. I remember ending the week with what I now know to be a common mission trip feeling – that sense that I had gotten more out of the experience than I could have possibly given to others. Though I had my future all figured out, on that trip I began to wonder if maybe life was about more than simply accumulating wealth and power for one's own pleasure.

Over the next couple of years I became increasingly involved in my church's youth group and in the summer camp programs of the Kansas East Conference. Through all of these experiences I began to feel that maybe my plans for the future were changing, like maybe I didn't have it all figured out. I think it was by about my sophomore year of high school that I began to think I wanted to be a minister when I grew up. At this point I'm not sure that I used any language about being called to ministry, but I do remember feeling affirmed in my gifts by my local congregation and feeling like maybe it would make sense for me to pursue ministry as a career.

Through the last couple of years of high school I became increasingly convinced that I wanted to go into ministry. During the closing worship service of my last week at camp before heading off to college we sang "Here I am, Lord" and I remember it being an incredibly emotional time for me. Of course I was exhausted because I hadn't slept all week and had been on the emotional roller coaster that church camp is, but I think there was more than that going on. I was scared about going to school in the fall and leaving behind the youth group that I loved and the comfort that I found there. But in worship that night, maybe for the first time ever, I think I felt God calling me to ministry and

realized that it was about more than my wants and my desires. By that point my plan for life that had been so thoroughly mapped out in seventh grade had been shot.

And now here I am, nearly ten years after that summer before college, an ordained elder in the United Methodist Church. These last ten years have been a roller coaster ride and for the last four or five, and especially during these last three, Ridge United Methodist Church has played a huge part in the journey.

Over the course of the last couple of months I have really struggled with how to put together this sermon because I feared that it could quickly become a “yay I’m ordained, good for me” kind of thing. And I don’t want it to become that though, I’ve already talked more about myself than I’d like to. This morning what I want to explore is the reality that as Christians we are all called to be in ministry and that when we open ourselves up to God’s call on our lives, sometimes our plans get messed up.

As I began thinking about what I wanted to share this morning I found myself gravitating toward Isaiah 6:8, the story of Isaiah’s call that is the basis for “Here I am, Lord.” Hear these words from Isaiah 6:1 – 8.

*In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. <sup>2</sup>Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. <sup>3</sup>And one called to another and said:*

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I chose these words because they can remind us all of the call that we have. There are tasks that need to be done and to which God calls us all to serve. Even though not all Christians are called to the ordained ministry, we are all called to be in ministry. All of us as Christians are called to open ourselves to God and to what God is doing in our lives for the transformation of our own lives and for the transformation of the world. As we all respond to the call of God on our lives it will take shape in different ways for each of us, but the important thing is that we all remain open to and faithful to that call, even when it might mess up some of our best laid plans.

As Christians we are called to ministry in our baptism. All of us, regardless of the gifts we've been given, are called to use them in service to the world. This is something I want to make sure we're all clear on, for too many churches look to their pastors to do the ministry. As Christians we are all called to do the ministry of the church. Ordained ministry then is a particular kind of ministry within the church.

As I said, I've been really struggling, for a couple of months now, with what to say this morning as a newly ordained minister. There is a part of me that wants to say, oh it's no big deal, it's just a series of hoops that I had to jump through to become "official." And while there is a part of me that feels that way, I also understand that it is a significant milestone, it is an achievement. And so I want to share a little bit this morning about what it means to be ordained in the United Methodist Church as a way of laying the groundwork for discussion about the call to be in ministry that each and every one of us has as Christians.

When I look through the history of our faith I look to people like Abraham, Moses, King David, Jesus, Paul, Mother Teresa, and Dorothy Day. None of these

persons was ever ordained. They all did incredible ministry. And we could add many other names to that list. Clearly being ordained is not a requirement for making a difference for God's people.

So what does it mean to be ordained as an elder in the United Methodist Church? According to the Book of Discipline, an elder is a person ordained to a lifetime ministry of service, word, sacrament, and order. Elders are authorized to preach and teach God's word, to administer the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion, and to order the life of the church for mission and ministry.

To be honest with you, when I read these descriptions, it sounds a lot like what I've been doing for the last three years as a probationary elder. In fact over the last couple of months as I've been talking about being ordained numerous people at Ridge have said to me, "you're not ordained?!" And when I've responded that I'm a probationary elder it's not uncommon for people to wonder what I did to get put on probation.

Several weeks ago now all of us who were to be ordained from the North and South Indiana Conferences gathered with Bishop Coyner for a retreat and he had us read an article that talked about ordination. There was some helpful information in it, but nothing that differentiated between what it meant to be ordained and what it meant to be commissioned, the step that happens when you begin your probationary time. When I asked for help in clarifying this, both Bishop Coyner and the chair of the Board agreed that there was much confusion within the greater church.

Yesterday morning I was ordained in a worship service at Annual Conference, but that was one of only two things that happened this last week. Earlier in the week, on

Wednesday evening, I was voted into full clergy membership of the annual conference – these two steps go hand in hand. Some refer to this as being admitted into the greatest union in the world, others draw the parallel of tenure. At its core, it is an acknowledgement by the other clergy in the annual conference, that upon the recommendation of the Board of Ordained Ministry, they feel that I am fit to carry out the duties of an ordained clergy person.

As I said earlier, I know that this is an achievement and a milestone, but in all honesty, I don't feel any different standing before you this morning than I did last Sunday as I helped lead worship or the Sunday before when I last preached. I am still Jeff. I am now Jeff who is allowed to wear a stole while leading worship and who is allowed to preside over baptisms and communion in settings other than the church to which I'm appointed. But I'm still Jeff...

Anyway, back to what is really important this morning. All of us as Christians are called to be in ministry. Over the last couple of weeks I have had some interesting conversations with folks whose stories have illustrated this point and served as a reminder that God can mess up our plans when we're open to and respond to that call. I want to share both of these stories with you and then challenge you to think a bit about how God might be calling you to be in ministry to the world.

A couple of weeks ago now I sat down with a college student to talk about some struggle's that she's having with faith. She has recently been hurt by some thoughtless things that Christian acquaintances said and she is struggling to more fully open her life to God. She shared with me an analogy she had recently used when talking to a friend. "I'm willing to let God in to have control of the main floor of my house – sure God, you

can decorate the living room and the kitchen, I'm willing to surrender those things to you." She said. "I am afraid to let God have any control over things in the upstairs, in the personal space of my life. I'm afraid if I let God in to those deeper places in my life it will mess up my plans and I'll lose control." After listening to this college student's fears her friend responded, "What you have to remember is that the entire house is God's."

We are so often fearful to let God into our lives because it might mess up our plans. When we think God might be calling us to serve through the church or to connect with people in need in our community it can be a scary thing! It might require sacrifices, things might have to change, and we're hesitant to do that.

The second conversation I recently had was with a dad who worked for years in the business world. As we talked he observed how easy it is for us to get wrapped up in the distractions of life that are all around us and how when we fall into these traps we don't take the time to think about the things that are really important – we simply live our lives. He shared his experience of losing his job and being forced to slow down. As his patterns and his rhythms of living changed he found himself listening more and more to God. As he did this he found himself changing things within his life, in his relationships with family and friends alike. When he slowed down and listened to God's call in his life, it messed up his plans, it messed up the course he was traveling, but as we talked I could tell that he was grateful that it had.

So what about your story? How are you like this young college student? Are you trying to keep God out of certain places of your life? Are you fearful of what might happen if you lose control? Do you want to hold on to your own plans so badly that the idea of them being disrupted or changed is almost too frightening to handle?

Or maybe you're like the other man I visited with recently? Have you had a change in pace where you've begun to allow God in? Have you listened to God calling you to reach out to others and to serve and to change the way in which you do things? Have you been grateful for these experiences and the way they've touched you?

My experience tells me that we are all a combination of both of these stories – we are fearful to lose control and to let God in, yet we know that when we do it can create meaningful opportunities to have our perspectives changed, our priorities shifted, and deeper meaning brought to our lives.

So I want to challenge you this morning to ask those tough questions. What might God be calling you to do differently in your life? Who might God be calling you to be? I don't doubt that some of you at Ridge Church have the gifts and the graces to be an ordained minister. I think that God might be calling some of you to that and I hope that you might be open to that call. I am also certain that we are all called to be in ministry. To be shaped and formed by God so that we can share God's love with others through our lives and our work.

In December of 2002, some ten years or so after I had written my essay for Mr. Cackler, my mom and dad sold the house I grew up in and moved. In their packing and unpacking my mom stumbled upon the essay that detailed my plans to be a rich and famous lawyer so I could have all of the money I wanted to buy all of the things I wanted. At this point I was just finishing up my first semester of seminary and preparing to become the pastor of Whiting United Methodist in just a few months. I was nowhere near the plans that I had laid out for myself – and I was grateful for that.

Whoever you are, whatever your plans are for tomorrow, for next fall, for a couple of years from now or for 10 years from now. May you always be open to God's voice calling you to follow. May you always be willing to use the gifts you've been given to serve others. May you always be open to letting God mess up your plans. And may you trust that opening yourself to God's calling and nudging and having your plans for life drastically changed, as scary as it is, can bring about unimaginable rewards and be incredibly fulfilling.