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Singing Impossible Possibilities: Installation of Deacon Scott Knarr Mount Zion Lutheran Church, April 17, 2016

Debbie Lou Ludolph¹

Texts: Isaiah 43:8 – 13, I Corinthians 12:4 – 13, Matthew 25:31 – 40

Grace and peace to you from God, the Singer and the Song. Today we take a big breath with you, Mount Zion and Scott, Two Rivers Ministry Area, and Six Nations Anglican Parish, as you imagine your way forward as Church, the Body of Christ, in this particular time and place. My guess is that you gather, as we all often do in these times, half in hope and half in fear. You have worked hard to get to this day, so you know something of what the road ahead will be, but, even with faith and hope, it is still a risk.

Outside these walls we all find ourselves wondering what *is* possible in a world where war and conflict, hunger and rape, racism and sexism feed our fears. More specifically, in the Church we know about the sometimes troubled partnerships of clergy and musicians. We know about isolated proud congregations who seem to want to die in their buildings rather than work together. We know about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission findings and the complicity of the Church in the pain of First Peoples on this land. These realities live deep in our histories.

But today we humbly open ourselves to the Spirit's announcement that the world is other than we thought. We lean deep into our collective baptismal call, where our imagination is stirred to sing of the future-creating capacity of a faithful God who is always making new amidst this risky business of loving our neighbour and being Church.

We have glimpses of this promised newness in at least three relationships today: in the movement of Mount Zion to walk with Scott towards this ministry, creating a contract that says he is called to the *edge-places* of the church and the community; in the commitment of the Two Rivers Ministry Area to work intentionally together towards right relations with indigenous peoples; and in the invitation of Six Nations people who reach out yet again and offer a gospel welcome, saying in treaty fashion, "Come, be with us. Walk with us. Sing with us."

It is hopeful to see these glimpses, and to celebrate the Spirit moving among us, but do not be fooled into thinking that this collaboration means the road will be easy; the baptismal waters poured over us are lively and dangerous! We are baptized to die to old ways and patterns and to rise into freedom and newness. Being Church, doing ministry at the edge-places, and opening to new partnerships is risky business.

In the texts today, we are given clues about how to orient ourselves for risky ministry. The poet Isaiah reminds us of the power of witnessing to God's transformative presence among us. Israel is in exile and disoriented, and God proclaims to a disoriented Israel, "You are my witnesses! Gather everyone together, and even those who have been following false gods, and let them all say what is true. But you, Israel, you are my witnesses SO THAT YOU

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will know and believe and understand.” What I find interesting, and what I didn’t really see before, is that it doesn’t say, “Be my witnesses so that everyone else will know,” but it says, “so that YOU will know.”

And, the text says, bring even those who are captive to false gods. Could consumerism, productivity, self-sufficiency, and ethnocentrism be called our false gods? Here we are, even with our captivities, and, Isaiah suggests, our hope for this ministry, for imagining an alternate world and for leaving behind the scarcity models by which we live, is in gathering and witnessing to the God of newness who meets us at the edge of our personal and collective fears.

Today, in our witness, we are enacting the liberation we seek – this is a God who has called settlers and indigenous to work together, clergy and musicians, churches and the wider community – all towards the common good. And God says, testify to this newness. You are my witnesses! Mount Zion, Two Rivers, Six Nations Parish. *Testify, so you know!*

A Diaconal Minister of Music is called to enliven this transforming witness through song. As theologian and church musician Paul Westermeyer suggests, “The liberation God bestows takes sounding form in our bodies as we sing.”² Perhaps when you sing *Great is thy faithfulness* with those who have sung it all their lives you know deep down something more of God’s faithfulness; or when you sing the spirited four-part harmony South African song to the text, “*God welcomes all, strangers and friends, God’s love is strong and it never ends,*” you know, and even remember into the week, that you are called to be a welcoming people marked by love and hospitality; or when you sing your bewilderment and your fears with Bach’s rich harmonies set to the lament, “*O, God, why are you silent,*” you find that the address to a hidden God embodies God’s presence. Perhaps you have experienced this transformative witness when you have sung of the impossible possibilities of God,³ as Mary did so long ago, “*My heart shall sing of the day you bring, let the fires of justice burn,*” and in the singing of the song, you have gained a Magnificat kind of courage to bear God’s presence in doing justice. This is the gift of music sung in community that is open to the Spirit’s transformation.

Scott, today, this organ is a sign that we celebrate the gift of music that God has given you, a manifestation of the Spirit to witness to the presence of God among us, SO THAT we will know that God is God and the impossible *is* possible. Every Sunday, when we come for the meeting⁴ tired from a week in the world, help us sing this impossibility of God that witnesses to God’s steadfast love and faithfulness. If we don’t sing an alternative world, there will be no courage, no freedom to choose differently. We must sing a world where rivers run clean and indigenous women are safe and the land is treated with respect and refugees are welcomed and people of different faiths work together for good. That is the song we have to sing week after week so that it sings in us and through us, all of us, until it is so!

In today’s texts, there are at least two hopeful reminders to meet the realities of our world with Scott’s diaconal ministry. First, Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians that this risky *edge-places* ministry is a communal call – it’s not all up to Scott. Scott is one member of the Body and is being installed into a particular call where there are gifts given by the Spirit to

² Paul Westermeyer, *Rise, O Church: Reflections on the Church, its Music, and Empire* (Fenton, MI: Morning Star Music Publishers, 2008), 43.

³ “Impossible possibilities” seems to describe well the hope within an alternative worldview. It is a phrase I first heard from theologian Allen Jorgenson and since have read in Walter Brueggemann’s work.

⁴ The “meeting” is one of Gordon W. Lathrop’s terms for the primary gathering of the Christian community in *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993), 1.

the whole Body of Christ *for the common good*, each to be used to build up the other. That means all of us are called to contribute to this ministry with the gifts with which we have been allotted. This is cause for celebration – look around the room! We are rich in gifts allotted by the Spirit!

Furthermore, this diaconal ministry *cannot* be done alone or it risks being a false witness. We need each other as Body of Christ to be deeply attentive and present to life's unfolding in order to perceive the work of the Spirit, and we need our friends of other faiths and experiences to help us deconstruct our words and songs in order that they can be what is needed to serve the common good. In a moment, we will claim our interdependence and commit ourselves to this Body of Christ oneness that serves the common good. Make no mistake – this is a communal call.

The second hopeful reminder in the texts is in the clarity of purpose that the gospel presents. Matthew guides the postmodern Church in its priorities by locating Christ “among the least of these.” Mount Zion and Scott, together you will discern in what specific ways you will respond to the needs you find at the edge-places, but the text today assures us that if we are looking to serve Jesus, we will find him by serving those in need. Christ *is* in Attawapiskat in the youth who cannot imagine living another day, waiting for us all to respond; Christ *is* groaning with the land and melting glaciers waiting for us to change our daily habits and public policies; Christ *is* among the elderly at Iroquois Lodge waiting for songs to be sung and stories to be heard and hands to be held; Christ *is* sitting here in the pew waiting to be noticed in our own hungers and song-less places.

Contemplating the Matthew text, Scott imagined it this way:

When I was sad, you sang a song to me.
When I was lonely, you gave me a guitar.
When I was angry, you listened to my truth.

Scott, today, we give you a bowl and a towel to signify the servant heart, which will characterize this ministry. Let there be no doubt that Christ is to be found in serving the stranger, the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick and the imprisoned.

And today you will receive a water drum. Embedded in your ministry is a relationship with Six Nations. We know too well that the Church has been to the boundary of settler-indigenous relations before, and we've misused the relationships. We settlers have much learning and listening to do. We still have little idea of what it means to live into a wampum belt treaty, but Jesus gives us a clue today with the clarity of the Matthew text. It is a Jesus' way to be humble and serve those who are in need; perhaps we are learning that this means to listen at those edge-places, and to be peace-makers, not to dominate. In a word, Scott and all of us today claim with this ministry and this water drum that we desire to be ministers of reconciliation. Thank you, Father Norm, and those here from Six Nations, and thank you Good Hearted Women,⁵ your presence today is larger than just who you are; you give us courage to begin. May it be so.

⁵ The Good Hearted Women, *Mino Ode Kwewak N'gamowak*, a local indigenous drumming group, have worked together with the Eastern Synod and Waterloo Lutheran Seminary, and were present to participate in this service.

Shaking our heads wet from being dunked in the lively dangerous baptismal waters, and nourished again at the Table today, let us *together* embark on this risky business of doing ministry.

Let us remember we are not alone.

We witness to a faithful and compassionate God,
 who is always making new.
We serve a living Christ,
 who waits for us in the stranger and those in need.
We are empowered by the Holy Spirit,
 who allots an abundance of gifts
 for the flourishing of all humanity
 and the healing of creation.

And let us sing deep and strong, with gratitude and with anticipation, pregnant with God's impossible possibilities!

*My heart shall sing of the day you bring,
let the fires of your justice burn.
Wipe away all tears for the dawn draws near
and the world is about to turn!*⁶

⁶ "Canticle of the Turning" in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 723. Words: Rory Cooney, based on *Magnificat*; Music: Irish traditional, STAR OF COUNTY DOWN. The congregation sang this as the Hymn of the Day.