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Strong, Loving and Wise: An Ordination Sermon¹

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Text: 2 Timothy 1:1-14

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Today is a day to remember. Bonnie is being ordained to the office of the holy ministry. For every pastor here, it is a day to remember—to remember your own ordination.

Remember! That word keeps coming up. The word keeps coming up in the letter to Timothy. Three times in four verses, "... remembering your tears", "... remember your sincere faith", and "... I remind you to stir into flame the gift of God bestowed when my hands were laid upon you." (The same Greek word, *mimnesko*, is at the root of each of these words.)

Most especially for you, Bonnie, today is a day to remember—more than just endless essays in the seminary. In a very real sense your memory takes you right back to the beginning. With Jeremiah you have heard the call from God, "... before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born, I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." This evening you, too, claim this eruption of faith as your own. The church has gathered here to recognize this embryonic call from God. We have come to St. Mark Church in Kitchener to send you out as a prophet to the nations—Tavistock is the place!

There is still more to remember. "Remember your teachers", the author tells Timothy. "I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and

your mother Eunice and now, I am sure dwells in you." Notice. Our first teachers are often our parents or grandparents. This evening I remember how my parents transmitted the faith to me. For this heritage I give thanks—for all the saints, for your parents, Bonnie, for Ann and Holly and for all parents who in life and witness transmit the sacred mysteries to their children.

This evening you remember another group of people—your own family. You have received the love, support, and challenge of Gil, Steven, Robert, and Stephanie. In many ways you have them to thank. For there it was that you learned to really do ministry. In the ebb and flow of our closest relationships we hammer out those resources that enable us to care. The skills of ministry are honed and tested as we struggle with the joy and pain of family life.

One more remembrance—yes, your baptism! No spiritual amnesia this evening! Remember your baptism. For it was in that event that God gave you the Holy Spirit—the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. When you baptize, when you lay your hands on the candidates for baptism, you, too, transmit the Spirit.

The last reminder to Timothy has to do with another gift—the gift of the holy ministry. We know this from First Timothy. In 4:14 Timothy is urged, "Do not neglect the gift you have which was given you by prophetic utterance when the council of presbyters laid their hands on you."

Let us move on from the remembering to the next point and take a look at this gift, this charisma. "Stir into flame the gift of God bestowed when my hands were laid upon you." The Greek word for gift is *charisma*. (The accent is on the first syllable.) It is this charisma that we have come to bestow on you this evening, Bonnie. What is this unique charisma anyway? Will you be qualitatively different when you walk out of here this evening than you were when you entered? Yes, you will! You will be leaving with a new gift—a charisma. What is this gift of God? The answer to that question is the heart and centre of our text, "The Spirit God has given us is not a cowardly spirit, but rather one that makes us strong, loving and wise". Those of you who study liturgy will recognize these words as the title of Robert Hovda's book, *Strong, Loving and*

Wise: Presiding in Liturgy. Strong, loving and wise! What a trilogy for ministry! The Greek word for strong is *dunamis* from which we get our word dynamite. That's right! The Spirit is dynamite. And it takes dynamite to be a pastor today, not the kind of explosion that shatters in the air like a blazing meteor and burns out quickly to a cold ash, but a strength that shows its power in weakness. The beatitudes spell out what kind of power this is, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for doing what is right, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven". There is an underneathness to this power that shows its face in humility and service.

The second quality of the Spirit's charisma is love, *agape*. What more can I say? St. Paul splices this hymn—1 Corinthians 13—right smack in the middle of a treatment of other spiritual gifts. The verdict is simply, the greatest of these is love! The charisma you receive today is the charisma to love. Love your people, Bonnie. Love your people! When you love your people ministry happens. It's as simple as that!

The third quality of the Spirit's charisma is wisdom. Strong, loving and wise! Lutherans have not been good at emphasizing this quality. In fact the wisdom literature has often received scant treatment in our theology.² However, I commend this gift to you—the gift of being a wise counselor. Words like prudence, good judgment, discretion come to mind. As I reflect on my own ministry, those words loom very large. Many times in your ministry you will be called upon to exercise the qualities of prudence, good judgment, and discretion. As a pastor, your people will open their lives to you. Do not betray their confidence! This responsibility may be a great burden for you at times, but the Spirit has given you the charisma that you may be strong, loving and wise.

All of this comes to you simply with prayer and the laying on of hands. There is a rich history among the people of God for this practice. The sick are healed by the laying on of hands. Persons receive the Holy Spirit with the laying on of hands. People are consecrated to an office by the laying on of hands. With this simple tactile gesture you are given the office of pastor. Remember to use your hands in your ministry. They are instruments of healing.

Remember! The Charisma! And now the Call! I remember a very special moment—when you told me about your call to

Trinity, Tavistock. I said to you, "This is God's call!" This evening, once again, I want to say unabashedly, "This is God's call to you!" I know this evening is a very special one for you. The church is now recognizing God's call to you. Fred Buechner, a theologian-novelist, says very profoundly what you are doing today. You are listening to the "voice of your own gladness". He writes,

What can we do that makes us gladdest, what can we do that leaves us with the strongest sense of sailing true north and of peace, which is much of what gladness is? Is it making things with our hands out of wood or stone or paint on canvas? Or is it making something we hope like truth out of words? Or is it making people laugh or weep in a way that cleanses their spirit? I believe that if it is a thing that makes us truly glad, then it is a good thing and it is our thing and it is the calling voice that we were made to answer with our lives.³

Remembering, the charisma, the call! For what purpose? The author writes to Timothy, "For this gospel". You are set apart today for no other reason than for the sake of the gospel. This task gives you no special status or prestige, only that you share in Paul's suffering as Timothy is invited to do. "Join with me in suffering for the gospel." As a pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church In Canada, I invite you to this calling. In many ways your suffering will be intensified because you are a woman. Do not go seeking it, but it will be there—in subtle and not so subtle fashion.

In conclusion, guard the truth entrusted to you by the Holy Spirit who lives in you. When you feel the crush of despair, remember today! Stir into flame the charisma of God, the gift of God, the gift you received by the laying on of hands. When you reach your hand into the water of the font, remember. When you lift up the cup of blessing in the eucharist, remember. When you raise your hands in the posture of prayer, remember. When you open your mouth to proclaim the living word of the Lord, remember. The Spirit is at home in you—no cowardly spirit, but one that makes you **STRONG, LOVING AND WISE!**

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Notes

- ¹ This sermon was preached for the ordination of Bonnie Jane Scharf, 1 November 1986, St. Mark Lutheran Church, Kitchener, Ontario. I wish to offer my sincere thanks to Bonnie for extending to me the invitation to preach at her ordination and to the Rev. William Huras, Bishop of the Eastern Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Church In Canada, for his consent. The sermon is offered for publication to bear witness to the Spirit at work in the church extending its mission to the world.
- ² See Ragnar C. Teigen, "Values for Preaching from Proverbs", *Consensus* 4/2 (April 1978) 3-11.
- ³ F. Buechner, *The Hungering Dark* (New York: Seabury Press, 1969) 31.