

## On the Occasion of the Ordination of Brett Backus to The Priesthood

Brett, I first want to express my appreciation at being invited to preach at your ordination service. I am honored that you have asked me to do so.

- I. Introduction: Preparation for any sacrament, such as marriage or ordination, brings into sharp focus the powerful and life-altering step we are about to take. And so as we approach Brett's ordination this morning, it is fitting that we ask the questions "How do we really know that we are being called? Where does our call come from? How does our call affect us? And do we live it out?"

First, how do we really know that we are being called? What we do know clearly is that our calls occur in the context of both our individual lives and our communities. We are not left to our own devices in discerning our calls. In his book *Sources of Strength* (1997), Jimmy Carter tells the following story:

How do we know when God is speaking to us? It's not always easy. One of my daddy's favorite stories to tell his Sunday School students was about a boy who worked from daybreak to dark on the family farm. This boy got it into his head that he was destined to receive a call from God. Sure enough, one morning, as he worked in the field, he looked up at the sky and seemed to see clouds forming the letters "GOP." "That's my call from God!" he said. "It's telling me that I need to Go Out and Preach." So he left the farm and began preaching. But no one wanted to listen to his sermons; he was just no good at it. Only then did he figure out what the message in the clouds had really meant: "Go On Plowing."

Carter rightfully asserts that our calls must be affirmed by our Christian communities. The Holy Spirit works in many ways – within us with that still quiet voice, and among us as one body – speaking through and between us. Today the Holy Spirit is working through this entire parish community and this Diocese to affirm your call, Brett Paul Backus, to the priesthood.

- II. The Ascension part of the story. Brett, not all that many months ago you were "passing through Knoxville" and about to return to Virginia Seminary when, at the

Bishop's request, you came to see us at Ascension. You agreed to check us out as a possible assignment in the Diocese when you completed seminary. You know, Bishop vonRosenberg, Brett was not very interested in being assigned to Ascension. As I've come to know you, Brett, you have a kind of countercultural view of authority, so Bishop we are grateful that Brett came. Brett, that day as we talked about your call to ordained ministry and your hopes for the future, I could envision how your gifts could meet the needs of this parish in a powerful way. As I described to you what our community is like, what ministries we are trying to build, and the sincerity and commitment of the people of Ascension, I could sense that your interest in coming here was taking root and beginning to grow. Finally, you said to me -- (and I've never had anyone say this to me in a job interview) -- "This is a real bummer. I think I might really like it here, but that throws all my plans out the window. This is not what I had in mind!" Your experience that day was just one small example of the twists and turns that our ministries take when we have committed ourselves to go where God calls us. Our God is a God of surprises and calls us into new and renewed ministries throughout our lives -- ministries that are not what we might have even imagined or pursued on our own. Sometimes God, in fact, does ask us to throw our plans out the window, as Brett experienced.

- III. Where does your call come from? In today's Gospel Jesus told his disciples that the harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few. Therefore, he continued, ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. This is immediately followed by what is called "The Missionary Discourse," where Jesus assembled the twelve and gave them a clear mission and the authority to carry out that mission. So, first and foremost, Brett, you are being asked to intentionally ground your ministry in the call of Jesus Christ to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom. You are being asked to be guided by Christ's love, rather than by the distractions of the world around us.

This grounding in Christ is not something that you can assume or take for granted. There are many ways that the realities of ordained ministry can begin to distract us from the clarity and freshness of our calls. We can become burdened by the suffering of the people who come to us, especially if we try to carry those burdens alone. We also can become falsely inflated by our successes, thinking that the miracles we see come from our own abilities. And, the praise we might receive can be seductive, even as the disappointments and criticisms we experience can lead us to become hardened and cynical. Our defense against these very human responses is to stay rooted in the knowledge that it is God who has called us, it is God who will sustain us, and that we are called to be the vehicles to transmit God's grace, but cannot ever be the ultimate source of that grace.

- IV. How will your call to the priesthood affect you? "Here am I; send me!" said Isaiah in our reading from the Hebrew Scriptures. Brett you have also answered God by saying

“Here I am; send me!” Underlying this response is your willingness to open yourself to be continually reshaped in your ministry. When I entered seminary, my notion of what it meant to answer God’s call was that I would say yes; others would see what I had to offer; and then I’d learn the skills needed to become a priest. I did need to learn those skills, but much more importantly, I have had to be formed and reformed and then reformed again into God’s image. That change process has run deep, it continues to occur, and I do not pretend to be in charge of it. It is the work of God’s grace in my life. I can cooperate or I can resist, but I now understand that God will be reshaping me throughout my life. And so, Brett, I believe that God will reshape you for years to come. Hang on my young brother, the ride is wonderful and has just begun.

- V. How will you live out your call? Ephesians tells us that each of us is uniquely gifted by Christ. Clearly, it is not only the ordained who are gifted by God – it is the entire community. Those of us who are ordained are not of a higher order than the lay brothers and sisters who minister with us.

Brett, would you stand as I share my final reflections with you? You have been called by God to a life of priestly ministry. This call has been nurtured by your family, affirmed by your church, and supported by your Bishop. And your wonderful wife is standing beside you as you live out your call. As a priest in God’s holy church, you are making an incredible commitment to devote your life to God’s work and to God’s people. But this one thing you must always remember: Your ministry as a priest, as important as it is, is only one part of the total ministry of God’s church. You are surrounded this day by God’s ministers. Without their ministries, your ministry will be incomplete. Nourish, care for, and teach them. Take them with you to Bolivia and teach them about the needs and vitality of the church in other parts of the world. Share with them your humor and your willingness to be open and honest. Help build leaders among them and let them see Christ in you.

At the same time, look to them to teach you. Be open to their feedback. Let them love you and care for you. Listen to their stories; let your story and their stories resonate with one another. Strive to lead them, but do so with humility and in collaboration. Look to see God’s presence in them and offer Christ’s presence to them -- not by needing to have the answers or by being in charge, but by following the Holy Spirit’s guidance to be one with them in your ministry.

Brett, my brother, you are surrounded today by people who love you. We are grateful that you are here among us, and we cherish the God-given opportunity to minister side-by-side with you. May the gentle breeze of The Holy Spirit be always behind you, carrying you forward in ministry; may the Son of God be always in front of you, warming your face and lighting your path, and may the hand of God be upon you this day and forever. *Amen.*