

June 25, 2006

“What Then Shall We Say?”

(The Five Things A Minister Has to Say)

On the Occasion of the Ordination
of

Kimi Elizabeth Yokoyama Whipple

Sunday, June 25, 2006

8:30 am (Chapel) and 10:30 am (Sanctuary)

Community Christian Church

Kansas City, Missouri 64112

Sermon by Robert Lee Hill, Pastor

Text: Romans 8:31-39

31 What then shall we say to this? If God is for us, who is against us? 32 He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him? 33 Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies; 34 who is to condemn? Is it Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us? 35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? 36 As it is written, "For thy sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." 37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

A Word of Thanks --

On behalf of the entire congregation, I want to express thanks to Kimi's parents, who ushered her into life and then sent on her path at an early age, taking her with them to be part of Limestone Presbyterian Church, in Wilmington, Delaware.

Additionally, we want to say thanks to Dean Susan Sonnenday Vogel and the rest of the St. Paul School of Theology community for preparing her so well, to be ready for her next steps as an ordained minister of the Church Universal of Christ Jesus our Lord.

And we say thanks also to Dr. Paul Diehl and the entire Region of the Christian

Church (Disciples of Christ), for the oversight, guidance and custodial care the Region has given to Kimi over the past four years.

Before we proceed any further, let's be honest about our hopes and dreams of this marvelous new minister, this promising leader. We have some parameters of hope; we have some assumed profiles of what is needed. We'd like our ministers to aspire to certain ideals. We'd like our ministers, especially our newest ministers, to be....

as daring as Deborah;
as faithful as Ruth;
as untiring as Moses;
as wise as Solomon;
as close to The Master as Mary Magdalene;
as loyal to Jesus as his own mother;
as biblically savvy as Marcus Borg;
as homiletically profound as Fred Craddock;
as passionate in the pulpit as Cynthia Hale;
as focused on purpose as Rick Warren;
as sensitive to seekers as Bill Hybels;
as full of courageous wit as Bill Coffin;
as prophetic as Will Campbell;
as engaged with evangelicals as Tony Campolo;
as with-it in worship as Sally Morgenthaler;
as relationally connected with others as Paul Diehl;
as good with appliances as the Maytag Man;
as skilled on a computer as Bill Gates;
as good in the kitchen as Emeril;
as popular as Oprah;
as impressive on the putting green as Michele Wie;
as long off the tee as Tiger Woods;

and as good in the yodeling department as Barbara Oldham.

We'd prefer our ministers to be

In Shape – but not so much so that they make us hyper aware of own lack in that category;

Up-to-date – but not so far out in front of their people that their people mistake them for the enemy;

Top Rate – but not so good that they incite feelings of inferiority among their colleagues;

Down to earth – but not so much that we think they're merely "dirty;"

Heavenly Minded – but not so much that they can't do any earthly good.

Yes, we want great ministers! Well, brothers and sisters, we have been blessed with the arrival in our midst of an outstanding ministerial talent. She has not only heaps and heaps of "potential." She also has a lot of "actual"! And whatever she does, however she measures up to your expectations and the expectations of the broader expanses of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), if we will but receive the gifts she has to offer, I believe this will truly be a defining moment in the evolving history of the Church and in her ministerial journey as well.

As we engage in this ordination service, I want to lift up a pinnacle moment in the correspondence of the apostle Paul for our mutual consideration.

I refer, of course to the book of Romans –
 the "Matterhorn" of Paul's theology,
 the "Grand Canyon" of his deepest convictions,
 the Ultimate Equation for Equity between the sky of the gospel's promise and the earthen reality of the gospel being lived out.¹

This is the book on which every transformation of the church's tradition has turned.

Before Augustine could revolutionize Western spirituality, he had to turn to Romans. "*Take up and read....*"

Before Martin Luther could help to reform and rid the church of its vagaries, he had to provide his own interpretive commentary of the book of Romans.

Before John Wesley could teach us all to be “strangely warmed” and transform the church of his day into a church on fire for the gospel, he had to provide his own interpretation of the meaning and ramifications of Romans.

And before Karl Barth would challenge the puniness of what passed for Protestantism in the face of the juggernaut of Nazism, he too needed to provide a rapprochement with the book of Romans.

I speak this morning specifically of the 8th chapter of the book of Romans, simply because it is one of the most beautiful chapters in the whole Bible, declaring the bluntest declaration of the sinfulness of humanity and the remedy that can be found for it in the forgiveness of God, and the layered logic as to the law of the Hebrew heritage and its fulfillment in a Jewish carpenter from Nazareth named Jesus.

Alexander Maclaren thought so much of the eighth chapter that of the 407 pages of his commentary on the book of Romans, 100 pages are devoted solely to the eighth chapter. He regarded it as the most crucial of the sixteen that make up Paul’s most magnificent treatise.

Most specifically, I mean this morning to lift up the 31st verse of the 8th chapter.

You may have missed it, regarding it as a merely conjunctive phrase, a rhetorical question in no need of an answer.

Or you may have done the calculations and assessments of its place within the book of Romans and discovered that it is the exact middle verse of the entire volume.

Or you may have already done some excellent exegesis and found that the “these things” to which Paul refers is the very grist and grit of any gospel worth having:

1:16 - *“the gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith...”*;

5:1 - *“we are justified by faith...”*

5:6 - *“while we were still sinners, Christ died for us...”*

8:22 – *“We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail until now”* and

8:26 – *“the spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words...”*

But I want to lift up the 31st verse as a “working project” question – as Howard Thurman might put it – as the thematic emphasis that the apostle Paul would have us all address as people of God, and especially for pastors who lead the people of God. What I’m suggesting is that Paul’s seemingly innocent question is the very center of his concerns at this time as the chief missionary of the Church. This question is the very essence of what needs to be considered for a pastor and a people, and a church that wants to make a significant difference in the 21st century.

What seems to be a daunting question may be a wisely hidden, simple query. And for just a few minutes, please allow me to ask it in that way, simply as a question for Kimi to take with her into her future pastoral positions.

“What then shall we say....?”

It seems to me that there are, straightforwardly speaking, a literal handful of things Kimi has within her capacity to say as pastor of a congregation or in any other ministerial position. And the first of these things is :

I. “Hello!”

To say “Hello!” is to proffer an attitude of welcoming grace to others. To say “Hello!” is to refuse to treat others, as they are too often treated each and every day, as invisible. To say “Hello!” is to recognize the deep indwelling of both humanity and divinity in each and every heart we encounter.

Sometimes all a minister needs to do to create a space for grace – in an individual’s life or within the fellowship of a congregation – is merely to say “Hello!”

That and leading others to say “Hello!” to one another. I’m convinced that 100% of half of the world’s problems is because we have not properly, caringly, carefully

enough met each other. In this instances, we could say, someone forgot to say "Hello!"

So, Kimi, get ready to say "Hello!" to a lot of folks and to introduce them to the practice of saying "Hello!" To say "Hello!" to one another. To say "Hello!" to their best selves. To lead church members to say "Hello!" to the wider community, particularly those yet without a church home. To lead congregations and other churchly institutions to embodying a sense of "Hello!" and thereby showing the world that there are persons and institutions that care.

Kimi, do not be surprised if others grant you miracle-worker status when you do this. We abide in a world too often numbed by anonymity, immobilized by indifference, and desperately waiting for someone, to say, as John Prine puts it, "Hello in there!" When you do, you'll be doing an every-day miracle. And it will be a blessed event to behold.

II. *I Love You!*

I hardly need to remind you Kimi, nor you, people of God, that beyond every Christian theology and beneath every assumption of the Christian faith, love is the essence of what it means to follow Jesus. However, I may need to remind you to *say* the words "I love you!"

Of all the utterances needing more frequent citation in the official transcripts of Church life, the phrase "I love you!" has to be near the top of the list. Saying "I love you!" with our lips and with our lives. Saying "I love you!" like the early Church did: "And they devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." (Acts 2:42) How could this blueprint for the Church's life and witness become so real, so vibrant? Only with love, and with the fellowship as a whole saying, with sincerity and genuineness, "I love you!"

Despite the fact that his thought set the whole modern way of being human into motion, the philosopher Descartes really had it wrong. "*Cogito ergo sum,*" he posited. "I

think, therefore I am." Oh, no! It really is, "*Amo, ergo sum.*" "I love, therefore I am."²

Raymond Carver, of great short story and poetry fame, knew intimately that love and saying "I love you!" were at the heart of any fruitful human enterprise. In one of his most memorable poems, he says:

*And did you get what
you wanted from this life, even so?
I did.
And what did you want?
To call myself beloved, to feel myself
beloved on the earth.*³

III. "What's going on?"

This is the third thing a minister has the capacity to say. When we are at the side of one in a hospital bed offering prayer, when we are talking things over after a project has concluded, when we are hanging out at coffee fellowship, we're basically asking a simple, yet sometimes revolutionary question: "What's going on?" When we're teaching a Bible study class, and someone comes from left field with one of those bombshell queries, they're exercising the right they share in sacred mutuality with you to ask "What's going on?" "What's going on..." with this text, with this line of theology, or with that particular tradition?

The Church needs a whole lot more people asking "What's going on?" We are in need of fresh, newly energized leaders, who are unafraid and unvanquished in their quest for more and better light. To ask "What's going on?" is the first step in bringing dreams into focus and then the focused dreams into reality. To ask "What's going on?" may be the most liberating thing any pastor asks when they are first coming on board and assuming their duties. This is not mere fact-finding. Rather, it is the establishment of the freedom (and the responsibility) to ask important questions about some of the

most important issues in a person's or an institution's life.

IV. "Good"

In a way we all need to be "Barnabas," who embodied his name, which means "son of encouragement." We are more in need of this word than many realize. In an atmosphere suffocating with cut-throat rhetoric and a generic spirit of acrimony, in an overly long moment in history when "what bleeds leads," in a culture which is addicted to the salacious, the seamy, and the grotesque, we need a positive word of grace. I nominate the word "Good" for such a role.

This is the word which, if we would pronounce it more often, would help us live out the *imago dei* in which we were born. May we never forget that, according to Genesis' creation drama, the first word recorded as coming out of God's mouth, after "let there be...," was "Good!" And then "Very good!"

As you have heard me say both casually and formally, Kim, too many Christians, walk around presuming badness, looking like they had been baptized in vinegar laced with garlic. Have they forgotten Paul's great conviction? *"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."* And if we believe that is true - and I know you do, Kimi - then what better word for us to pronounce upon a people or a place than "Good!"

This relates to a strategy for doing ministry in the world, too. Too often ministers become shackled by the tyranny of negativism in a particular culture. Too often we fall prey to the influence of the "boo-birds" who degrade the Church's importance or

regard the gospel as irrelevant. Get ready for them, Kimi. I know you've run into them. But, let me caution you, that your ordination will be like an infatuating flame to the moths of those who live life in the minus column. They are the ones who shout "No!" in the face of any possibility of change. They are the ones who vote "No!" on the question of whether the Church can ever impact the world with goodness. In the face of these nay-saying "nudnyicks," to use Yiddish phrase, be sure, Kimi, be sure, people of God, to "Count the 'Yes' votes!"⁴

"Counting the 'Yes' votes is the only thing that has ever moved the world forward and liberated the oppressed and healed the sick and offered hope to folks weighed down in the swamps of negativism.

And if you , if we all, are persistent enough, I'm convinced that not only is the apostle Paul right, once more, "that nothing can separate us from the love of God..." I'm also sure that the sour notes of the "boo-birds" can be - will be! - transformed into a chorus of "Hallelujahs!"

V. *"Goodbye"*

Of course the fifth thing a minister has the capacity to say is "Goodbye." Now, I don't mean simply at the conclusion of a ministry or the finishing of a task with a particular congregation.

Instead, I'm emphasizing that you and all ordained clergy leaders are in the business of helping others say "Goodbye."

"Goodbye" - so long - to unholy habits.

"Goodbye" - so long - to defeats.

"Goodbye" - so long - to outmoded ways of being.

"Goodbye" - so long - to childish ways that no longer help us become the children of God.

"Goodbye" - so long - to old-fogey-ism that hinders us from becoming truly

mature in Christ.

“Goodbye” – so long.

Kimi, you’ll also do as all ministers do, as all Christians do, too, as you help others say their goodbyes to those they love the most. These will be the most “teachable moments” in ministry. That has been my experience and that of countless others who have served as you are about to serve.

You’ll help others say “Goodbye” to those they cherish the most, those whose lives are entwined with theirs in ways that are almost impossible to disentangle. Don’t try to disentangle or untwine. Just help them say “Goodbye.”

This isn’t another form of saying “so long.” This is a far richer and much deeper experience than that.

The original form and meaning of the word “Goodbye” is “God... be ... with ... ye.” “God be with you.” In other words, it’s a benediction, a blessing, a good word for going, a word for sending forth. This is what the apostle Paul does at the end of Romans, with all those names and all those greetings. What is he saying? As important as anything else he had written to them up to that point. “Goodbye” “God be with you.”

So, to answer the question which Paul asks of the Romans and of the world, and especially of ordained ministers, “What then shall we say?” it would seem to me that these five things are a good place to start. They are, at the very least, five of the things which any minister worth her salt has the capacity to say:

“Hello!”

“I love you!”

“What’s going on?”

“Good!”

“Goodbye.”

And, Kimi, if you say these five things, among the myriad others things you will say in

a lifetime of service as an ordained minister, then you will have said a mouthful, indeed a life-full. And that not only will do. That will do just fine, Kimi.

So ...

"Hello," to the soon-to-be-called "Rev. Kimi Elizbaeth Yokoyama Whipple."

"I love you." We love you. We love you very much.

"What's going on?" What's going to go on, now , with you, in your new path?

We'll be very interested to know.

"Good!" Good for you finishing your degree at St. Paul School of Theology.

Good for you serving as an intern here a Community. Good for you being a leader in music and in ministry. Good! And...

"Goodbye!" Not "So long," but rather "God be with you," in whatever and all that you do.

What a blessing you will be to the Church of Jesus Christ. And what greater things even than these you will say! AMEN.

NOTES

¹ A phrase by Fred Craddock inspired this metaphor.

² I'm grateful to Bill Coffin for this nugget, which I heard him say a long, long time ago.

³ *"Late Fragment"* in *A New Path to the Waterfall* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1989)

⁴ This is an adage once made popular by Lyle Shaller. Where or from whom he originally got it I have no idea.