

Charge to the Ordinand: Heather Hunnicutt
First Christian Church of Marietta (Disciples of Christ)
September 9, 2018

When I was asked to give the Charge to the Ordinand, I asked what I should talk about. Heather said, “About three minutes.”

“Leave ‘em wanting more.” It’s good advice from an old dog trainer to a new preacher: Always leave them wanting more. As Barbara Brown Taylor (1998, p. 103) says, “The quality of attention brought to a short sermon tends to exceed that brought to a long one. The less one is offered, the more one may savor.” There’s no sermon that can’t be made a bit more by being a minute less.

You’ve left me wanting to hear more about Acts 17:23: the altar to *Agnostos Theos* (Ancient Greek: ἄγνωστος Θεός)—the unknown God. In the words of Martin Luther (1483-1546), *Deus absconditus* (literally, the hidden God) refers to God’s unknowability. As a psychologist, I’ve often observed that what a person knows about God says more about the person than it says about God. During your seminary training, God always seemed to be in the next sentence—always elusive, never quiet captured.

One of my spiritual mentors used to remind me that Thomas Merton (1915-1968), the Cistercian monk and Roman Catholic priest, used to say, “If you find God with great ease, perhaps it is not God that you have found.” In the *Contemplative Prayer*, Merton (1969, p. 61) observes:

“In a word, God is invisibly present to the ground of our being: Our belief and love attain to him, but he remains hidden from the arrogant gaze of our investigating mind which seeks to capture him and secure permanent

possession of him in an act of knowledge that gives power over him. It is in fact absurd and impossible to try to grasp God as an object which can be seized and comprehended by our minds.” (Merton, 1969, p. 61)

My charge to you is for you to keep searching and help us find God in his hiddenness, to recognize God in front of us in the ordinary experiences of life.

You are fluent in several languages. My charge to you to become more fluent in God’s preferred language of silence so you can help people like me and others hear God in the silence. As Barbara Brown Taylor (1998, pp. 88-89) has said, “God’s silence is the problem that we clergy are hired to solve.” After all, if God always spoke directly to us in theophanies such as the burning bush, we would not need the clergy.

Over the past few months, as I have thought about your charge, I have mostly thought about how proud I would be to call you my daughter. I’ve thought about how it would feel like to give a daughter in marriage. I am really very proud of you, and yet I have had nothing to do with creating the person about whom I take such pride.

In over 40 years of practicing neuropsychology and teaching college, graduate school, and doctoral candidates—and having done intellectual testing on thousands of people—including dozens of Mensa candidates—I can attest to the fact that you are the most intellectually gifted student that I’ve ever had. Seriously, don’t take my word for it; ask Dr. Jerry Gladson.

But in the past year, it is your emotional intelligence that seems to have grown the most—your intuition, your discernment—your wisdom (Ancient Greek: σοφία; English, Sophia). These virtues are your most valuable gifts. To me, the highest form of wisdom is kindness.

My charge to you is to be kind to others—to be kind and patient with others. “Patience attains all that it strives for,” says St. Teresa of Ávila (1515-1582). And I say, “Kindness is a good way to operationalize love in everyday life situations.” As a preacher’s kind, I can tell you that kindness is about loving those the most who seem to deserve it the least. God lets us pick our friends, but he does not let us pick our board members.

Loving others must be balanced with loving your self. Psychologists call this “self-care.”

The Fifth Chapter of the Gospel of Luke is instructive to those of us who are devoted to serving others. In the middle of Chapter 5—serving as a fulcrum, a pivot, a center point on a balance—there is one short verse (16) that says just when he was needed most, “Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed” (Luke 5:16; NIV). Another translation reads, “But he often withdrew to the wilderness for prayer” (Luke 5:16-39; TLB).

Rev. Fred Craddock (1928-2015), the great orator, Candler theologian, and Disciples of Christ preacher, used to say, “Some of us regard turning from evil to good a victory; only persons of extraordinary spiritual discernment can at times turn from good to the power necessary to resource the good” (1990, p. 72).

My final charge to you comes in the words of St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430 CE): “Fill yourself first, Heather, for only then will you be able to give to others.”

William F. Doverspike
September 9, 2018

Notes

Heather’s chosen scripture readings for her ordination consisted of Zephaniah 3:14-20 and Acts 17: 16-28.

Areopagus is a prominent rock outcropping located northwest and adjacent to the Acropolis in Athens, Greece. The English name is a composite form of the Greek name Areios Pagos (πάγος or *pagos* meaning “big piece of rock”), translated as “Ares Rock.” In Greek mythology, Ares was supposed to have been tried there by the gods for the murder of Poseidon’s son, Halirrhothius. When Halirrhothius raped Alcippe, Ares’s daughter by Agalaulus, Ares killed him. Ares was then tried for this act in a court made up of his fellow gods. Ares was acquitted. Many years later, the Romans referred to the rocky hill as “Mars Hill”, after Mars, the Roman God of War.

Acts 17:18 “Jesus and “Resurrection.” The Athenians are presented as misunderstanding Paul from the outset; they think he is preaching about Jesus and a goddess named anastasiß (English: Anastasis, i.e., Resurrection).

Luke 5: ¹⁵ The report about him spread all the more, and the crowds assembled to listen to him and to be cured of their ailments, ¹⁶ but he would withdraw to deserted places to pray” (New American Bible)

References

- Craddock, Fred B. (1990). *Interpretation: A Bible commentary for teaching and preaching*. Louisville, KY: John Knox Press.
- Merton, Thomas (1969). *Contemplative prayer*. New York, NY: Image Books / Double Religion.[Originally published as *Climate of Monastic Prayer and Contemplative Prayer* by Cistercian Publications and Herder & Herder in 1969].
- Taylor, B. B. (1998). *When God is silent*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield

Ordination Service

Charge to the Ordinand was given by Dr. William Doverspike. Act of Ordination and Presentation of the Signs of the Office were provided by Rev. Denise Bell with Rev. Dr. Jerry Gladson, Brenda Taylor, and Rev. Wilma Zalabak. Charge to the Church was given by given by Rev. Dr. Jerry Gladson.

About the Ordinand

The Rev. Dr. Heather Hunnicutt was ordained in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in 2018. Before earning her doctoral degree, she served as associate pastor at First Christian Church of Marietta, Georgia. She became an authorized minister in the Penn Northeast Conference of the United Church of Christ in 2019. She joined Salem United Church of Christ in Pocono Pines, Pennsylvania as their pastor on August 4, 2019.

Dr. Hunnicutt holds a B.S. in psychology, an M.A. in Professional Counseling, an M.T.S. in Theological Studies, and a Th.D. in Theology. Her doctoral dissertation is entitled, *The Aporias of Healing: A Theology of Post-Traumatic Spirituality*, focusing on what it means to be fully alive after having experienced trauma. Heather did not plan to pastor as a primary vocation. In fact, she enrolled in seminary to better understand theology in order to work with counseling clients who had experienced cultic abuse.

Heather is a Licensed Professional Counselor in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and works primarily with adolescents and adults who have survived trauma, religious and spiritual abuse, and those who are intellectually gifted. In addition to pastoring the church and maintaining her private practice, Heather also serves on the Top of the Mountain Ecumenical Council, Penn Northeast's Mental Health Ministry Team, and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)'s Mental Health Equity Cohort.