

Ordinations to the Transitional Diaconate
St. James' Cathedral, June 7, 2008

Games

In her novel, *The Good Mother*, Sue Miller writes a scene in which a divorced mother arrives at the apartment building of her former husband who has custody of their young son. She is there to pick him up for a visit. In the lobby of the building she walks in on a bunch of kids in the middle of some kind of shoot 'em up game. The kids are hiding behind sofas and pillars dodging each other and suddenly popping up, imaginary weapons firing back and forth. Not bang, bang of course, but something a little more Star Wars: *pht, pht, pht*, I suppose. She 's been listening in on the game for a while when she hears this exchange:.

"Pht! I shot you Joshua. You're dead. I shot you!"

And from a far corner of the room comes a small voice in response:

"I am not dead. I'm not even in this game."

There are a lot of games to be played in the lobbies of this world. Games that begin perhaps in childhood but which grow into adult patterns of behavior and expectation that startle us with their power to dictate our behavior. Anxious games of acquiring and manipulating. Games of power and prestige, control and coercion. Like those first friends of Jesus with their game of who's the greatest. Games that keep our fears of the unknown at bay, our suspicion of the other, the deep seated worry that there will not be enough to go around so I better defend my little hoard against your need .

I hardly need to point to the geo-political sandbox for examples of the deadly consequences of all this. Across the globe a resurgent tribalism awash in anxiety threatens to undo us all. The posturing and provocations of supreme leaders and commanders-in-chief are games with unthinkable potential outcomes. Games of complacency, self-absorption, and mind-numbing consumerism in the cultures of the West ensure suffering and deprivation for the rest of humankind on this planet. Even in the little world of the church these games get played out -- our endless and debilitating debates about who's right and who's wrong, who's in and who's out, whom shall we ordain or not?

A preacher I know tells the story of giving a sermon at a very grand parish somewhere on the East Coast in which he tried to lay out some of the challenges he saw for the church in the years ahead. At the coffee hour later he was accosted by a woman who seemed to be a matriarch of the place. Shaking her finger in his face she said to him, "You know, before you people came along with your women and new prayer books and gays, we had this darling little church."

"And do you know," replied the preacher, "that this darling little church cost the Son of God everything?"

Into this world awash in the little games of suspicion and scarcity and fear steps the One who was willing to die for it: Joshua, Yeshua, Jesus the Christ. That we gather here today at all is the sign of his presence. Whatever else we do in this assembly we are here to watch and wait and listen for him. We are here to step out of the anxiety of the world - - if for only a time -- so that we might be able to plunge right back into it having seen another reality, another world we are committed to build.

I believe the only excuse for all this, the only reason for the existence of something like the church, the only reason we gather to lay hands on sisters and brothers to lead our common life is this: the vision granted to Paul – the hidden glory of Christ who is the very image, the perfect icon of God. We ordain these friends today to be living signs of that same glory. For the time of your diaconate in particular we ask you to signify to us the fundamental charism of the baptized life. We ask you to lead us out of our deadly anxieties that keep a veil firmly over all our faces, the games that distract us from the truth of who God has made us to be. We, all of us, are bearers of the image of God, remade, reborn into the likeness of Christ who came among us not to be waited on but to care for us, to tend us, to heal us and save us. The blinding glory of God – what the young theologian Peter Rollins calls God’s hypernimity – not anonymity, but hypernimity, God’s saturated presence through all of creation -- the boggling glory of this wholly other God who chooses to come among us as one of us and to make a home in (of all places) our own hearts. A God who lays himself bare to the nails and the crosses of this world, who refuses the games of retribution and revenge. A God who will not leave us mired alone in our own devices, caught forever in each other's cross fire. Nothing less than that we ask you to present to us in your own exercise of this ministry.

We are here today to stand at the table of the hospitality of this God. In torn bread and spilled out wine to receive the torn and glorified Body and Blood of Christ who is God for us, the Bread of heaven, the cup of salvation ... our own humanity remember, taken on by God and taken up into the divine life and now lavishly placed back into our own hands, our mouths, our bodies.

We lay hands on our sister and our brothers today to give them a place to stand among us. We ask them to join those we have already asked to stand at the table with their bishops for this task: to serve the assembly of those who have been baptized into the death and resurrection of Christ, to serve you and me, to assist in taking the bread we bring and the wine we pour and to hold them before us as certain signs of who we are and who we are becoming. We ordain them to lead us from this table out into the world where we ourselves become food for the hungers of this suicidal world.

Like the Lord we follow, the gifts are not for us. Our life is not ours alone. Tyrone, Laurel, Court, Phil, Bradley, never forget, the holy things you are asked to handle routinely are not yours. This is the great danger of ordination, for everyone in the professional religion business, the over-familiarity with the holy, the caricature of deacons and priests who become what a former Bishop of Chicago calls mere technicians of the sacred. Pray never to lose the capacity to be astonished, to be surprised, to be

knocked off your horse by the devastating love of Christ who has called you to this way of life. It's a good thing you're all so young – I hope with Jeremiah you'll be able to say for a long time, "But I'm only a boy, I'm just a girl! Who me?!" No games, dear friends, only gratitude.

Gratitude for amazing grace. This is the antidote to the deathly boredom and murderous anxiety of the world. It tried everything it had once: Bang. You're dead Joshua. But as an ancient Christian proclamation puts it, "On the cross death grabbed a body and found that it has seized God." Jesus was raised from the dead and lives beyond death. The games of the world go on, but in Jesus let us unclench our fists, hold out our hands and refuse to play. My dear ordinands, lead us.