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### The Purpose of the Church and its Ministers

Micah 4:5-10, 13a; Galatians 4:1-7; John 1:1-5 *from A Women's Lectionary for the Whole Church*

Andrew Heintz, we are so grateful to welcome you back to your church home today, both that we might celebrate your ordination to Christian ministry - not as a fulfillment of your calling and vocation but certainly as a waypoint on your journey - and that as a congregation we might bless you and send you out to share the Good News of Jesus Christ with other communities that the path ahead of you may cross.

I can't help but acknowledge that your ordination today reminds me in so many ways of my own. The whole thing made me feel very insecure. I was uncomfortable with the designation "reverend." I didn't feel very confident doing basic things that would be expected of me, like serve communion - mainly because no one had ever taken the time to show me how. It seemed like so much about ministry would vary from place to place and from time to time, and there was little in the way of basic instruction or orientation. Meanwhile I was driving in from out of town not unlike you are today - in my case I arrived at Howard Church in Nashville, which had been my sponsoring congregation, from Des Moines after beginning work in Iowa - and I felt like an outsider in a community that had once been home. I felt like an imposition on people I needed for the credential but would not be serving in practice. I say all of this only to relate what an odd experience it was for me and to validate the complexity of this moment in your life and in the life of the church. You have been an active and faithful part of our community dating back to long before I was a pastor here. And your calling has now taken you on from your formation as a ministry to your practice as a minister. You are now using the gifts that this church has seen in you for some time, and that is all cause for gratitude and celebration. So this is not a moment merely in your life; it is an occasion in the church's life. For as a body of people we find our fulfillment anytime one among us finds their flourishing. So we are grateful to God for the work accomplished through you; and we are grateful to you for sharing this moment with us.

And - what a strange moment this is. If the only thing we had to be grateful for today were the chance to be here and together, that would be enough. 2022 will mark my tenth year in ministry, and my fourth year at United Church of Chapel Hill. About half of my ministry here has been spent during the pandemic, and an inordinate focus on questions like whether to gather, how to gather, and what must be required of us as a result of these peculiar circumstances. I first met you, Andrew, on a busy Easter morning in the hustle and bustle between our traditional Sunrise service and worship later that morning. Today all that energy in our building is hard to imagine, so stunting has Covid-19 been to our ambitions. But highly disruptive and disappointing times like this can have a way of clarifying our purpose. So often here I have wondered - what is my job? At one point I thought it was to build on the momentum that Jill and Rick Edens had left here by completing a strategic plan. At another I thought it was to lead a general program of chorus, discipleship, outreach and worship characteristic of congregations like ours. On some days I've thought my job was just to give pastoral care to these people; on others I've been consumed with maintaining this mammoth building. Of course these are all job functions that come and go with the seasons or take on varying degrees of importance depending on who clamors most loudly for one's attention. But what has kept me going through some very difficult moments, and certainly through the ups and downs of the pandemic experience, has been a return to a much more elemental sense of purpose. A doctor has to perform their daily charting, but physicians are not in medicine to fill out patient charts. And a teacher has to make her lesson plans, but she is not a teacher for the sake of planning lessons. Everyone with a real vocation sometimes runs the risk of confusing a function of the job with the job itself. Truth be told there is a bit of OCD in my family, meaning that I am prone to fixing all too finely on a part to the neglect of the whole. So I have found it so enriching and valuable to return to a basic question - What am I here for in the first place? Can you speak the purpose plainly and live with the ambiguity day to day? A doctor is healing patients. A teacher is nurturing students. We ordained ministers? We are preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Now as a job description, you might say, this is not very helpful. But still our calling to preach the Gospel can be a guiding light from one season to another, from one place to another.

Paul writes to the Hebrews that "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and today, and forever." Or as the hymn says - "as it was in the beginning, is now, and

ever shall be” - so is the abiding presence of God among us. God’s need for ministers to proclaim the Good News. At Christmas we say it this way: Emanuel, God is with us. At Easter we put it differently: Christ is Risen, Alleluia. The seasons change but the message is the same. Oh, you’re a chaplain. Oh, you’re an educator. So what if you’re a pastor or a priest? The jobs come and go. The duties change. The responsibilities differ. But your ordination today means that your purpose today and tomorrow remains the same: this congregation blesses you now and the association ordains to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

But of course the day is soon to come when you’re back in Massachusetts and summoned to the bed of a hospice patient. I don’t know what words you will use; I doubt they’ll even be particularly Christian - but I know that you will preach the Gospel. Or maybe you’re called to some parish and things go smoothly until some specious plague changes your plans. And then the only question that matters is the Bonhoeffer - Who is Christ for us today? I don’t know what you will say or how you’ll say it; who knows how you’ll figure out what is next for you and your people - but you will be ordained to preach the Gospel.

I once heard Walter Brueggeman tell a story about some Anglican diocese in Canada. The diocese had been bankrupted by settlement claims associated with abuses perpetrated by the clergy. The courts had finally foreclosed on all the church’s assets and some measure of justice had actually been done against an ecclesial system that was corrupt from the bottom up. Aside from the victims themselves who had been hurt over many generations, at the death of the diocese it was so sad to contemplate the faithful remnant who had been so failed by their pastors, ministers who not only in their words but in their actions had failed in their purpose to preach the Gospel. Here were the people of the parishes in grief over all that they had lost. Money. Buildings. Trust. All lost. How will we carry on?

A new bishop had been appointed, an outsider of the province. Once all the penitence had been enacted, once all the apologies sincerely made, once all the reparations paid. The new bishop called a press conference and said - get this - “We have a book and a towel, a table and a cup. And we are back in business.”

Here is a pastor who has lost everything - but not his purpose to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ. God has provided amply everything that we need to fulfill this purpose and to share this good news. We have a book and a towel, a table and a cup.

Andrew, I don't have any business really preaching to you about your ordination, but someone had to preach a sermon on this occasion and by the circumstances we have received that duty falls to me. I say these things not to advise you but even more to remind myself and to encourage our congregation. It may feel that the world is in such disarray, and perhaps the moment makes possible so little that we had imagined and expected of the church.

So let there be no doubts among us that we are in business here because we have everything to fulfill our purpose for now and for all time. God has provided all that we need to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ. People of God, take these things - and do your job. Amen.