

ROLL UP YOUR SLEEVES

Text: I Peter 1: 13-16

"So roll up your sleeves,
Put your mind in gear,

Be totally ready to receive the gift that's coming when Jesus arrives." (*The Message*)

The literal translation of this verse reads as follows:

"Wherefore girding up the loins of your mind, being sober, perfectly hope on the grace being brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ."

Greetings in the precious name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who called you to this night of ordination and commissioning as elders and deacons in the United Methodist Church.

You have traveled a long and arduous journey to arrive at this moment. You heard God's call - a call that was confirmed by your local church and then by your colleagues in ministry. The grace and support of the Holy Spirit and a "whole cloud of witnesses" along the way undergirded your perseverance, your hard work, and your studies to bring you here this evening. I am honored and privileged to be your ordaining bishop on behalf of the whole Church and the New England Annual Conference.

Take a deep sigh of gladness, joy, and humility as you kneel at the altar to be ordained. Breathe in deeply the wonder and celebration.

One of the most formative moments of my childhood was when my father's prize-winning cow was giving birth to a calf. She was the cow that provided nourishing milk for our family and others. We were so excited that she was going to birth a calf, but when she went into labor, the problems began. What should have been a very natural event quickly turned to trouble. Her labor was not going right. There was blood everywhere, and we were all very concerned. My father called the vet. The dignified veterinarian arrived as quickly as possible - dressed in his best clothes! It was as if he had rushed to us from an important event. He had not stopped to change his neatly ironed shirt, tie, and pants for the proper attire needed for the situation. Yet, he rolled up his sleeves, knelt down beside our cow, and centered everything within him on this birth, saving the life of our cow and her calf.

I was amazed that he showed no concern about ruining his clothes; he simply went into the crisis without any hesitation. More than half a century later, I am still astonished by this doctor and his vocational spirit and commitment. This dear veterinarian responded

to the call with such urgency and passion; it was as though the situation before him was the most important work he had ever done.

Tonight, as we reflect upon the Scriptural passage that was read for us, we are challenged by Peter, as it has been translated by Eugene Peterson. Christian ministry, whether by laity or clergy, is all about rolling up our sleeves. Though I may be challenged on this one, let me say this, my dear ordinands and commissioners: We become pastors and deacons *par excellence*, not by our theological gymnastics from the pulpit as either liberal or conservative pastors or deacons, and not because of our gender or the color of our skin, but through our willingness to roll up our sleeves.

Going back to the Scriptural text, verse 13 begins with the word “therefore.” A scholar has said, “‘Therefore’ ties in with everything Peter has explained thus far [in verse 3-12]. Now that you have focused your thinking positively you need to roll up your sleeves mentally, pull yourselves together, and adopt some attitudes that will affect your attitudes.”¹

Our dear ordinands, you have mastered biblical interpretation, theological articulation, history, doctrine, polity, and everything else needed by you of the Church. As an elder in the Church, you are ready “to take your authority.” The stole that will be placed on your shoulders is a sign that you are being yoked with Christ. As you go to your mission fields wearing these stoles, realize the world around you is no longer a Christian world. In today’s culture and world, you are placed as preachers of “the Word.”

May I remind you of some of the challenges before you as you preach to congregations or minister in your respective settings? You are called to wear this yoke and preach the gospel in a nation whose global military is increasing on an escalated scale while spending on education is decreasing. You are going to your churches and communities at a time when people are being killed on the streets because of their color, race, or accent. We are closing churches and spending less resources in the urban areas of our world when for the first time in history, more people live in urban areas than in rural areas.

We minister in places where corporations and employers demand the services of undocumented workers, yet aren’t willing to fight for just and holistic immigration laws for the people of God.

We go to churches where there is a cry to reach out to youth and young adults, yet many of these same churches do not understand that many of the issues on which we

¹ Dr. Constable's Notes on 1 Peter, p 14

spend the most of our energy are irrelevant to our youth and young adults. Many of our churches wonder why youth are not in the pews. Hello...Youth are interested in ministry and mission. Many churches say they want youth and young adults, but their actions do not indicate that they really need them.

The 2017 Pentecost was one of the greatest Pentecost celebrations in my life. By the grace of God, I had the privilege of preaching in one of our churches and taking part of the confirmation of four youth and baptism of one of them. To prepare my sermon, I requested the pastor to ask the youth what they want to see in the church. Praise the LORD! These are some of their responses: They want the church to help them become closer to God. They want to see more kids in church. They want to have opportunities to serve in soup kitchens, and they want the church next to Bradbury's (a market) to have a kids' program.²

Whoa! Our children, youth, and young adults don't care whether you are black, white, yellow, or green. They do not care what color your hair is. They don't care about your politics or sexual identity. They just want us to do ministry! Hello, Church, do we hear? They want to do what?!? They want to do real ministry and mission.

Our dear commissioners and ordinands, your ministry will not be remembered for the size of your salary package or whether you lived in an air-conditioned parsonage, but for the prophetic leadership you provided that empowered the laity of your churches to serve others. You will be remembered because you were the pastor under whose leadership the people of God became agents of change in the communities you served.

One of my colleagues, The Rev. Dr. Chandra Soans, was sent by the United Church of Christ to do ministry at a church where the front lawn was used by drug dealers. As a new pastor, he went out to the front lawn every morning to collect the syringes, needles, and beer and liquor bottles from the previous night. The drug dealers would watch him and be baffled. Because of this pastor's passionate concern and commitment to address this issue with love, rather than fear, he refused to do anything but love them - even if love looked like cleaning up the needles and trash from their drug trades. The final straw came on a rainy day when he invited them into the church to keep dry. That was it! They left, never to return.

Today, this immigrant church in the northern part of Philadelphia is growing. In a personal email, Pastor Soans wrote:

² Taken from the statements made by the 2017 confirmands of the Church on the Cape, Cape Porpoise, ME, Pentecost Sunday, 2017

Now we have a vibrant church to which you are a frequent visitor on special occasions and we run 4 preschool centers and the 5th big one will be opened in September 2017. Currently we are serving 500 children and in September we add another 300 children. In addition to the new Center we are starting a college in September, particularly to train teachers for the schools. Our Housing Ministry is making people home owners in the neighborhood. Thousands have become homeowners because of our Housing Ministry.³

Friends, what a difference one person's willingness to "roll up the sleeves for Christ" had made in this community! I am sure you may have witnessed these kinds of ministry and mission in other parts of our nation and the world, as well!

Our dear laity, as you support these clergy, and all clergy, in this sacred journey together, remember that any one of them could one day become your pastor. You, the laity, also need to roll up your sleeves in order to make a difference in your communities and world along with your pastor. We need to stop wasting hours of debate about the color of the carpet or the design of the wallpaper. We need to stop hoarding our funds for a rainy day. Instead, we need to think about what we can do to become a Church in action in our communities and world.

Along with rolling up our sleeves, we also need to "put our minds into gear." We cannot journey on God's highway for the transformation of the world if we are of a neutral or closed mind. We need to shift gears constantly. Let me hasten to say "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and today, and forever." (Hebrews 13:8) The word of God never changes. However, we need to interpret the word of God afresh to each and every generation and circumstance.

It is where the words of Charles Wesley, "To serve the Present age, my calling to fulfill, O may it all my powers engage to do my Master's will!" become meaningful and powerful. As part of using all of our powers, it is crucial to have engaging minds for the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We cannot offer hope to the world unless *and* until we are ready to change the gears of our minds. With the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we can address the challenges of the 21st century and bring hope to the world, but in order to do that, we must watch for the signs of our times and be ready to respond with the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. I hope and pray that drawing your strength from the Wesleyan Quadrilateral of Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason, you invest time in continuing education and renewal.

³ Personal email from Dr. C. Soans to Bishop Devadhar on June 7, 2017.

Laity, when you go back to your local churches, ask the members of the Staff Pastor Relations Committees the question, “Can we afford *not* to have enough resources in our budget for Continuing Education and Spiritual Formation of our pastor?” When we place our minds in gear and ask the Holy Spirit to guide us, it helps us remove anything that would hinder the free action of minds in extending the Kingdom of God on this earth.

This past Memorial Day weekend, I spent time with many young adults as a part of the Pilgrimage of Trust in Missouri arranged by the Taizé Community. It was a powerful experience. At lunch one day, I had conversations with two people. One of them was raised in the Missouri Synod and had left the Church. However, as she was finishing college, in her search for her purpose in life, she was led to the Taizé Community in France. There, she said, she was touched by the power of simplicity, happiness, and trust. She felt the nudge to move to The L'Arche Community in St. Louis, Missouri. Although she did not know anyone in St. Louis, she followed the leading of the Holy Spirit and moved. Now she is participating in extending the Reign of God in the Seattle area.

Seconds later, another person joined us at the table and shared that she had been raised a Methodist, had attended seminary, and while working on her CPE (Clinical Pastoral Education), had been touched by what a particular Episcopal Church was doing for the disadvantaged children of God. She felt called to join that ministry and is happy and fulfilled today.

When I hear these transformational stories again and again of people wanting to be involved in the ministry of the Church - not inside the church building with the insiders, but leading others in their communities to find God's amazing grace and hope in their lives - my hope and excitement for the Church escalates. Honestly friends, I would rather spend my time as bishop among people who share what they are doing for God in the community, even in places such as bars, ball fields, or the workplace, than to hear about churches who are busy trying to add members to their rolls.

My dear Ordinands and Commissioners, you are starting ministry in a challenging, yet hopeful time. Someone stated it beautifully, "Is God calling us to be risk-takers, caretakers, or undertakers?"⁴ Class of 2017, may I challenge you tonight to be risk-takers, doing ministry using the Wesleyan quadrilateral of Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience, or as Peter put it beautifully, by putting your minds in gear while understanding what is happening around you, no matter where you are stationed. May you fully realize that at the end of the day, it is not about you, but about your faithfulness to the One who has called you into this ministry.

⁴ "Illustration, Homiletics," Volume 7, no.4, October-December 1995, edited by Leonard I. Sweet, p.22.

One of my hobbies during Commencement season is to google and read graduation speeches. I was struck by what Mark Zuckerberg shared in his 2017 Harvard Commencement speech: “The challenge for our generation is creating a world where everyone has a sense of purpose. Purpose is that sense that we are a part of something bigger than ourselves, that we are needed, that we have something better ahead to work for. Purpose is what creates true happiness. You are graduating at a time when this is especially important. When our parents graduated, purpose reliably came from your job, your church, your community. But today, technology and automation are eliminating many jobs. Membership in communities is declining. Many people feel disconnected and depressed and are trying to fill a void.”⁵ Zuckerberg's words are poignant for the relevance of the church and our ministry today.

Laitly, as these precious colleagues come to your communities with high hopes and the best theological preparation, please do not rain on their parade by saying, “We are dying.” or asking, “What can you do to bring in new members so that we can have more money in the collection plate?” Instead, ask them, “How can we roll up our sleeves and be in ministry together to reach out to the disconnected and depressed in our communities? How can we work together to fill a void in the lives of the marginalized, the drug addicts, the homeless?”

I often wonder if, as a bishop, I have ever made a difference in someone's life. In April while attending the Festival of Homiletics in Texas, I ran into a woman whom I ordained years ago and who is now serving in one of the southern conferences. She shared with me some of the transformational and risk-taking ministries she was doing. She smiled and said, "This is what you challenged me to do when I was ordained as a Deacon." It indeed gave me great joy to see someone involved in a risk-taking ministry!

Friends, as we celebrate 500 years of reformation, I believe in my heart that we are ready for a new reformation. It is the reformation happening not because of the Gutenberg age, but because of a google age! Millennials, digital natives, may not be there on Sunday mornings, but they google you; they stream you.

Friends, it is not about which school's diploma hangs on your wall, how tidy and neat your robes are, how large your congregation is, or how high your salary becomes. You will be watched by our youth and others to see how passionate you are about saving lives, no matter how messy and dirty we may get. Others will notice how willing you are to take risks to reach those who have never been reached. You are filled with and

⁵ Taken from the 2017 Commencement address of Harvard University.

empowered by the Holy Spirit. Use that gift, along with the love of Christ, to bring about God's purpose for the ministry you were born to do.

Laitly and clergy, last year in the New England Conference, we lost 1,771 members from the action of our church conferences. It is sad that we removed 602 more members from our rolls than we lost due to God's calling saints home. Friends, we are missing out on a great opportunity for witness and evangelism within our own bodies of believers. When was the last time someone stood up on the floor of the church conference and said, "Don't remove that person. Let me be in touch with her or him to share God's love and how much they are needed in our church?" Kindred, we are called to "roll up our sleeves" and "get our minds in gear," and be "filled with the sober spirit," as Peter said. We need to go where Jesus would go and do what Jesus would do. My prayer for you is that during this first year, as ordained and commissioned deacons and elders, you immerse yourselves in the "least of these" and by so doing, be living witnesses to the transforming grace of Jesus.

Beloved in Christ, Peter reminds us that our end goal is all about serving Christ and not ourselves. When we have clear conviction, our ministry is all about serving our Creator God as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ, filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. We will not be reluctant to roll up our sleeves and get our minds in gear for the sake of the gospel. Wherever Christ calls us, through our bishop or in spite of him, let us be ready to "roll up our sleeves." Let us constantly place our minds in gear, be filled and moved by the Holy Spirit, knowing that Christ will reward us. May God help us to press forward always. Amen.