

Ordination Sermon: John 12:20–33 (June 20, 2004)

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I bring you greetings this evening on behalf of your brothers and sisters in Christ who make up La Iglesia del Pacto de México, the Covenant Church of Mexico. Please keep your sister denomination and her leaders in your prayers. The church in Mexico is facing great challenges, complex problems, and tremendous opportunities for growth of many kinds. That sounds a bit like a description of Christian ministry, doesn't it? Pray for the *Pactistas de México*, the Covenanters of Mexico and for their ministries. I assure you that there are those in that country who, as their own vision of the world and awareness of the Covenant family expand, are also thanking God and praying for you.

This past spring, two of our neighbor ladies were continually sharing with us great excitement regarding their plans to travel to Rome in April and, among other activities, to see the pope. I could have engaged in one-upmanship with them and told them where I was planning to be tonight, and whom I was going to see. But I didn't! Still, it is good to be in Minneapolis, and a privilege to see President Palmberg! Glenn, we look forward to your next visit to Mexico.

To the Board of the Ordered Ministry and to its executive minister, I want to say, "Thank you." Thank you, Dave Kersten, for the invitation you extended to me, on behalf of your colleagues, to preach at tonight's service, to share in what Dean Glenn Anderson described as this "high and holy moment" in the life of our family of faith. The invitation takes on poignant meaning for me because yesterday, June 21, was the twenty-fifth anniversary of my own ordination. That night at the Annual

Meeting in Fort Collins, Colorado, forty-one of us made our vows and were duly ordained to the office of the ministry. So, thank you for this honor. And thank you for praying that God would use me and speak through me tonight.

The sermon text, John 12:20–33, has been read by Philip Stenberg. Now, before going any further, I invite you to join me in prayer.

Help us now to listen, O God, not for thunder or for angels,
but for your voice. Make us holy, consecrated with the truth.
Your Word is truth. Amen.

Through our text, we have entered this evening into the Gospel according to John at the point where Jesus is moving toward the last Passover with his disciples, and the hour of his death and glory. In the scene described by the sermon text, Jesus says, “The hour has come” (v. 23).

Tonight, for those of you who are being ordained or commissioned, the hour has come as well. For Jesus, the hour that had come was the hour for him to die and be glorified. For you, sisters and brothers, the hour that has come is the hour to be set apart. As Jesus prepared for his final Passover, and for his death, he left this teaching that has to do with all of his followers, in every age. But tonight, it is teaching that specifically has to do with you—you who are being set apart.

At last February’s Midwinter Conference for Covenant pastors and leaders, North Park Seminary professor Klyne Snodgrass said in one of his Bible study sessions, “I resist a clergy/laity distinction. Yet I live with the tension that there are some differences.” He went on to affirm, “The same ‘Christ identity’ is expected of all believers. And it is obviously first to be seen in pastors and Christian leaders, and modeled by them, and passed on.” Klyne’s reminder to those pastors and leaders was this: “It is not your identity you are passing on. It is the identity of Christ and his community.”

Tonight you are being set apart, ordained and commissioned, in such a way that your “Christ identity” will be seen by your people and the world; set apart to model the identity of Christ and his community, and to pass it on; set apart—using now themes from our text—to die, to serve, and to lift high the cross.

The scene begins at John 12:20 with what is often referred to as “the coming of the Greeks,” with what William Barclay describes as “the first faint hint of a gospel which is to go out to all the world.” We need to remember that these are not Greek-speaking Jews. These are Greek-speaking Gentiles. They came to Philip, a disciple with a Greek name who

came from a predominantly Gentile area. They came to Philip because he spoke Greek. “Sir,” they said, “we would like to see Jesus.” Philip went to tell his teammate Andrew, and then the two, in turn, told Jesus.

“Sir, we would like to see Jesus.” Biblical commentator Raymond Brown points out that in the theological context of John, “to see” may well mean “to believe in.”¹ So this request is really quite extraordinary: “Sir, we would like to see Jesus. We want to meet him. In fact, we would even like to believe in Jesus. Philip, please, can you help us?”

So what happened to the Greeks? We don’t really know. Their coming to Philip, and their request is of such tremendous theological importance that John never tells us if they ever got to see, or ever came to believe in Jesus. They disappear from the scene!

However, in spite of an enigmatic picture of what happened that day, we have gotten the first faint hint of a gospel which is to go out to all the world, a gospel which, in fact, did go out—across time, across geography—to all the world. And because it did go out, and because it must continue to go out, we are here tonight, in Minneapolis, to ordain and commission, to be ordained and to be commissioned. Little did those Greeks know what they were stirring up!

The Greeks’ request reached Jesus through Philip and Andrew. And Jesus replied, probably not directly to either the disciples or the Greeks but as a comment on what had just happened. Jesus replied, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified” (John 12:23, NRSV). The first Gentiles have now come to Jesus! And so he knows that “the hour,” too, has come. Their appearance indicates to Jesus that the time has come to lay down his life. The hour of Jesus’s return to his Father, through his crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension, has now come.

Jesus announces that he is ready for “the hour,” the hour of laying down his life and taking it up again, for the life and salvation of the world. Then he follows his announcement with some statements, some teaching regarding what the coming of the hour really means—what it means for him and what it will mean for those who would be his followers.

Jesus replied, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24, ESV). Ordained, commissioned, set apart to die.

This very short parable about the kernel of wheat is about Jesus’s Passion. The emphasis is on dying. In order to bring life to all people,

¹ Raymond Brown, *An Introduction to the Gospel of John* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 77.

Jews and Greeks, Jesus must die. This is the paradox: on the one hand, a dead seed; and on the other hand, a waving wheat field. Only through death is fruit borne. This is the mystery: unless a wheat grain dies, it will never be more than one grain. Only through death and resurrection can the full harvest of God's blessing be brought forth.

The parable is part of Jesus's reply to the remarkable news that some Greeks wanted to see him. So we know that it refers specifically to his death, his resurrection, and the rich harvest that will come as a result. But the context of the parable also makes the general meaning clear: Death is the means of gaining life, of bearing fruit. It is how people come to Jesus. It is how the crop can be harvested for eternal life (John 4:36).

Tonight you are being set apart, not to cultivate your own life in the world, not to promote your own aims, not to pursue your own desires and ambitions. You are being set apart, in surrender to Jesus and the way of the cross, to gain life, to be productive, to bear fruit. And so, in one way or another, you are being set apart to die.

Arden Almquist, former Covenant missionary doctor in Congo and, at one time, executive secretary of world mission for our denomination, wrote about dying in his book *Missionary, Come Back*:

Ultimately, any effort at identification with Christ must accept the possibility that following Jesus on the road to Jerusalem may well mean climbing the hill of Golgotha. The church, at its best, has always known this. And there have been reminders in our own time that identification in life may have to mean identification in death.²

Then Arden goes on to tell the story that we have been remembering and honoring this week, the story of Paul Carlson, Almquist's successor at the Wasolo hospital in the northern Congo.

Paul Carlson accepted his expendability, indispensable as he was to a hundred thousand people for whom he was the only physician. This meant accepting the cross, not as an isolated single fact of human history, but as a possibility for himself as a follower of Jesus Christ. "Thus he died, in a hail of bullets triggered by a nervous finger, at the very moment of rescue as a prisoner in Stanleyville. In this, Paul Carlson took Christ as his example."³

² Arden Almquist, *Missionary, Come Back* (Cleveland, OH: World Publishing Co., 1970), 185.

³ Almquist, *Missionary*, 186.

Have we accepted our expendability? Have we accepted the cross as a possibility for ourselves? What Arden underscores is as true today as it was when he wrote these words back in 1970: “A gospel which excludes the cross is not a gospel that can win today’s world. Our Lord does not ask us to *seek* martyrdom. He does ask us to be willing to follow him to the death, identifying with a needy and sinful world that it may know his love.”⁴

Who of us has not been moved, and inspired, by stories of such a willingness to follow our Lord, and such an identification with a needy and sinful world, stories like the one published in last July’s *Covenant Companion*, and updated in October, the story of Dennis and Susan Wadley. In 2003, Dennis ended an eighteen-year career as a Covenant pastor in California and moved with his family to Cape Town, South Africa. There, Dennis and Susan began a holistic AIDS relief and development ministry.

Last September, the Wadleys were robbed at gunpoint while driving in a township outside of Cape Town with their three children. This coming Sunday, *Covenant Home Altar* readers will begin a week of devotions written by the Wadleys. On one of the days, Susan reflects on that traumatic robbery event:

Later I found myself wrestling with God in prayer: “I’m not willing to put my children in danger, Lord. This is serious! I’m not willing!” The verses from Matthew 10 came echoing through my mind: “Anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me...; anyone who does not take his cross and follow me....” God was challenging me to surrender *all*—even my children—into his care. There were no guarantees for our safety, and there will never be no matter where we live. Our lives are truly in his hands. Believing anything different is an illusion.⁵

You who tonight are being ordained or commissioned are being set apart to surrender all, to accept your expendability, and to accept the cross as a possibility for yourself; set apart as leaders of a church called to follow her Lord to crucifixion, which precedes resurrection. Remember that the church’s current dying, your current dying—from the biblical perspec-

⁴ Almquist, *Missionary*, 190.

⁵ Dennis and Susan Wadley, “I Surrender All,” *Covenant Home Altar* 66 (Second Quarter 2004), June 30, 2004.

tive—is but the prelude to a great harvest. Remember the words of our Lord, “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24, ESV).

The Lord Jesus also told them, “If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him” (John 12:26, ESV).

Ordained, commissioned, set apart to serve.

But the service has a special quality to it. Jesus places a condition that needs to be taken into account. It is not just any kind of service. It is service that takes place within the context of following, following Jesus. J.B. Phillips translated verse 26 this way, “If a man wants to enter my service, he must follow my way.” Tonight you are about to be set apart for a very specific service to Christ and his church. What is essential here is that in your service, through your service, you follow Christ’s way. Even in suffering and death—especially in suffering and death—you are called to be willing to imitate Jesus, to follow Jesus. “Whoever serves me,” said Jesus, “must follow me” (John 12:26).

What will become of our service in the name of Christ if we enter into it but then we leave off following him and attempt to serve without following? It could eventually become a service characterized by bitterness and cynicism, or arrogance and nearsightedness. So it is that Jesus makes clear the utmost importance of following him even as we serve: “If anyone serves me, he must follow me...if anyone serves me, the Father will honor him” (John 12:26).

We follow, so we can be where Jesus is. We follow, so that the Father will honor us. We follow, so that we can lead and be what Latin American theologian Jon Sobrino called the “true church, the church whose story, when it is told, is like the story of Jesus.”⁶

“If any of you wants to serve me,” says Jesus to you and to me, “then follow me. Then you will be where I am.” *Then you will be where I am!*

And where is Jesus? We have remembered Paul Carlson during this Annual Meeting. Why did he cross back over the Ubangi River once his family was safe and go back to his hospital in Wasolo, back to where Jesus was, among the hungry, the thirsty, homeless and naked and sick and imprisoned? Was it not because of how he understood what it means to serve Jesus? “Whoever serves me must follow me. And where I am, my servant will be.”

⁶ Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994), 30.

And Alik Berg, Esther Nordlund, and Martha Anderson—three Covenant missionaries shot by bandits on a road in Hupeh Province in January 1948—why had they crossed the Pacific Ocean, and gone to China, and *stayed* in China among a suffering people, in spite of turmoil and threats and hardship and danger? Was it not because of how they understood what it means to serve Jesus? “Whoever serves me must follow me. And where I am, my servant also will be.”

This is our first Annual Meeting since we said goodbye to Burton Nelson.⁷ If he were here and were asked to reflect on what it means to serve Jesus, we all know whose story he would bring up! Why did Dietrich Bonhoeffer decide to leave the safety of New York City in 1939 and head back to Germany in order to, as he wrote, “live through this difficult period in our nation’s history with Christians in Germany”?⁸ Was it not because of how he understood the cost of discipleship, how he understood what it means to serve Jesus: “Whoever serves...must follow.”

At Burton’s memorial service, the following passage from Bonhoeffer’s *Life Together* was read. It is a quote that Burton kept on his desk.

Nobody is too good for the lowest service.... We must be ready to allow ourselves to be interrupted by God, who will thwart our plans and frustrate our ways, time and again, even daily, by sending people across our path with their demands and requests. [If we pass them by], we pass by the visible sign of the cross raised in our lives to show us that God’s way, and not our own, is what counts.⁹

Listen, now, you who are candidates for commissioning and for ordination: Nobody is too good for the lowest service, particularly if that is what following Jesus leads to. Even for such service, your church is about to set you apart.

When Philip and Andrew told Jesus about the Greeks who wanted to see him, he answered them with teaching about dying and serving. In verse 27, Jesus’s words become very personal. He picks up the themes found in verse 23, the themes of “the hour” and of “glory.”

⁷ Dr. F. Burton Nelson, North Park Theological Seminary professor of theology and ethics and well-known Bonhoeffer scholar, born August 22, 1924, in Hupeh, China, died in Chicago on March 22, 2004.

⁸ Rodney Combs, *Bonhoeffer’s Cost of Discipleship* (Nashville: Homan Reference, 1999), 32.

⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1945), 99.

“Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say?” We hear words parallel to the agony in the Garden of Gethsemane as described in the other three Gospels. We see the true humanity of Jesus as John portrays him. Jesus is fearful. He struggles with the temptation to cry out, “Father, save me from this hour” (John 12:27, ESV).

But his triumph comes in submitting to the Father’s plan: “Father, glorify your name!” (John 12:28, NIV).

God answers Jesus’s prayer. For the first time in John, the Father speaks from heaven. Jesus prayed, “Father, glorify your name!” Then, a voice came from heaven: “I have glorified it and will glorify it again” (John 12:28, NIV). What follows the heavenly voice are the last words that Jesus speaks during his public ministry, and the words that contain the third part of your commission.

Yes, you are being set apart to die, and to serve. You are also being set apart to lift high the cross.

Jesus said, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (John 12:33, NIV). Here, for the third time in John’s Gospel, Jesus speaks of being “lifted up”—in chapter 3, in chapter 8, and now again in chapter 12. “Lifted up”—the Greek word also means “exalted.” This is a reference to Jesus’s death on the cross. Jesus said this, notes the evangelist, “to show the kind of death he was going to die” (John 12:33, NIV).

But in the fourth Gospel, the “lifting up” of Jesus refers to the *total* mystery of Jesus’s glorification, one continuous action of ascent. Jesus’s return to his Father begins with the crucifixion but is completed only with his resurrection and ascension. And to what end is Jesus to be glorified? For what purpose is he to be lifted up? “And I, when I am lifted up, will draw all people to myself” (John 12:32, NIV). His being lifted up will lead to the gift of eternal life to all who believe in Jesus. This is the good news!

This is also the foundation of your ordination and commissioning tonight. It is the foundation because it speaks of the Christian missionary enterprise. And as Lesslie Newbigin so eloquently and convincingly declares, “We must recover the sense that the Christian missionary enterprise is the enterprise of the whole Church of God in every land, directed towards the whole world in which it is put.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Lesslie Newbigin as quoted in Michael W. Goheen, *As the Father Has Sent Me, I Am Sending You: J. E. Lesslie Newbigin’s Missionary Ecclesiology* (South Holland, Netherlands: Boekencentrum, 2000), 316.

“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” For Newbigin, one of the premier missionary statesmen of the twentieth century, this verse gives a picture of the Church. The Church is the body that is drawn together by the risen and exalted Christ. And it exists in the world for a purpose! The Church exists in the world everywhere as the agent of Christ’s gathering grace. And brothers and sisters, in your positions of leadership within the Covenant Church across the coming decades, you have the privilege and the responsibility of continuing the mission of Jesus.

You and I would do well to hear and heed the warning given by Walter Rauschenbusch. He is most remembered as a seminal thinker of the social gospel movement. What is not often remembered is that he looked to the modern missionary movement as a model for his ministry. From start to finish, mission informed his life’s thought and work. Almost one hundred years ago, Rauschenbusch wrote, “If the Church tries to confine itself to theology and the Bible, and refuses its larger mission to humanity, its theology will gradually become mythology, and its Bible a closed book!”¹¹

Friends in Christ, don’t allow your churches to refuse their larger mission to humanity. Instead, encourage them, help them to lift high the cross, the place where the sin that separates us from God and divides us from one another, is dealt with and put away. The truth is that in being lifted up Jesus draws all people to himself—people of all races—like those Greeks who asked to see him.

But then the question is this: How to make that truth credible? Newbigin answers the question this way: “That truth is made credible only when the witness borne to it is marked, not by the peculiarities of one culture, but by the rich variety of all human culture.”¹² So bear witness to the truth and make it credible! Equip your congregations to bear witness to the truth, the truth that, in being lifted up, Jesus draws all people to himself.

As you well know, the “larger mission to humanity” is not defined so much by geography as by people:

- by at least a dozen major cultural families throughout the world,

¹¹ Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 283.

¹² Lesslie Newbigin, “The Enduring Validity of Cross-Cultural Mission,” *The International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 12, no. 2 (April 1988): 53.

- more than two thousand religions, six thousand languages,
- and thirty thousand distinct societies and cultures,
- not to mention an unknown number of subcultures and countercultures.

And the “home base” of missions is now worldwide.

The defining issue for mission is no longer one of geography, a point of view that insists “We are here” and “They are there.” The defining issue is people—all people whom Jesus is drawing to himself, no matter where they are from, no matter where they are now. As one missionary veteran put it, “God is just as concerned about Iranians in Tulsa as Iranians in Tehran.” As Nathen Chang¹³ no doubt would put it, “God is just as concerned about Chinese people in the Twin Cities as Chinese people in Taiwan and mainland China.” The defining issue is people, no matter where they are from, no matter where they are now.

Do you know there are more Muslims in Dearborn, Michigan, than in Mecca? And there are more Muslims in North America than in Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Oman, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates combined! So where is the Muslim world anyway? And do we really want to know? We really do if we are convinced, as is Newbigin, that mission is not a detachable part of the Church’s being but is the central meaning of our being.

Indeed, we are here at this hour to celebrate the ministry that Christ has given to the Church in calling men and women to serve in its mission. And, as you know, in the United States and in Canada, the Church’s mission becomes broader, more varied, and more complex all the time. Some see God at work in this expanding mission opportunity, and they get excited about it. Others are more likely to blame God for allowing such a mess to come about. They see this multicultural reality more as a threat than as an opportunity.

Samuel Huntington, author of *Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*,¹⁴ has recently become a familiar name in certain spheres of influence in Mexico, particularly in the media, among politicians, and in academic circles as well. The cause of the uproar was the publication in March of an essay by this well-known Harvard political scientist titled “The Hispanic Challenge,” followed by the brand-new

¹³ Nathan Chang is the founder and primary leader of the Covenant Churches of Taiwan.

¹⁴ Samuel Huntington, *Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998).

book which expanded his views, *Who Are We? The Challenge to America's National Identity*.¹⁵ Huntington believes that there are too many recent immigrants. He specifically is concerned about Mexican immigration, declaring it a threat to the Anglo-Protestant culture that supposedly was the dream of the Founding Fathers. His conviction is that the Mexican people are not adaptable and are hostile to assimilation. That means that the US is on its way to being split into two countries with two distinct cultures and two separate languages. Huntington is passionate about the preservation of an identity. And that concern leads him to promote a concept of racial and cultural purity.

Representative of the many facts and figures that disturb Huntington are these two:

1. In 1998, the name "José" replaced "Michael" as the most popular name for newborn boys, both in California and Texas.
2. By 2040, Hispanics will represent 25 percent of the total population of the United States. They are changing the fabric of the entire country.¹⁶

Fellow Covenanters, immigration from Latin America, and from other parts of the world as well, is here to stay. The challenges it presents are truly staggering. These challenges are placing increasingly tough demands on this nation's identity and politics. But ultimately, do immigration and multiculturalism pose a threat or offer an opportunity? For us, for the Church, they offer an opportunity—an opportunity to flourish, an opportunity for expanded mission, an opportunity to introduce Jesus, so that he may continue, through us, to draw all people unto himself.

So, rather than sinking into an attitude of fatalism or joining in with disdainful moralism, rather than spreading incendiary claims about immigrants and people of cultures other than our own, rather than contributing to whipping up nativist hysteria—rather than doing any of that, *we can lift high the cross!* And this, dear candidates for commissioning and ordination, is what you are being set apart to help the Evangelical Covenant

¹⁵ Samuel Huntington, *Who Are We? The Challenge to America's National Identity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004).

¹⁶ Samuel Huntington, "The Hispanic Challenge," *Foreign Policy* 141 (March/April 2004): 30–45, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4147547>. "That'll be about the same time that the United States begins to transition into a 'majority minority' country in which those Americans who are White will be outnumbered by those who are non-White." Source: Ruben Navarrette, "Have We Failed Ourselves? Latinos Just Can't Get Along," *Latino* <https://www.latinometro.com/havewefailedourselves>.

Church do: to be the agent of Christ's gathering grace!

How prophetic were the words of Krister Stendahl, the bishop of Stockholm, Sweden, spoken to us on the occasion of our denomination's hundredth anniversary in 1985. He said:

Having been immigrants once, you are called to be a special church, understanding, open to immigrants that now come. The point of the gift, the genius in your history is not the Swedishness, but your remembering what it is to be an alien, and hence able to understand, and serve those who now come to this land.¹⁷

Yes. Here is the point of the gift, the genius in our history. As we remember what it means to be an alien, we remember that all God's people are spiritually descended from migrants and wanderers, and we lift the cross higher and ever higher.

Thank God, we are headed in the right direction. As Gary Walter wrote in the *Church Growth and Evangelism* quarterly earlier this year, we are well on the way toward becoming "as diverse as the world the Covenant Church serves."

Perhaps nowhere is the diversity of the Evangelical Covenant Church more evident than in the growth of ethnic churches—African American, Hispanic, Native Alaskan, Korean, Asian American, Laotian, Sudanese, Vietnamese, in addition to thirty multiethnic congregations.¹⁸

Ethnic ministries are growing more than twice as fast as the church as a whole, which itself is experiencing its most rapid growth in history.

Sisters and brothers, as you speak your vows and make your respective promises tonight, in the presence of God and this company of witnesses, remember what is important and what is not important. You are being set apart to die, to serve, and to lift high the cross. Remember, then, what is important. And what is not.

Fifty years ago, a sermon preached by Sigurd Westberg appeared in a book called *The Covenant Pulpit*. In 1954, Sig Westberg was a Covenant missionary to Congo. He later served as professor of mission at North Park Seminary and as the Covenant's archivist. His sermon, called "The

¹⁷ Krister Stendahl, keynote address at Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Covenant Church, Minneapolis, MN, 1985.

¹⁸ Gary Walter, *Church Growth and Evangelism Quarterly* (Chicago: 2004) Unpublished.

Attractiveness of the Cross,” contains this reminder for us all, and particularly for those of you who are about to be commissioned or ordained:

Mission, in its roundest meaning, is not a department of the work of the church. It was the very life of the early church. In proportion as it is not the life of the church today, just in that proportion the church is dead. Beside the spread of the Gospel, beside the lifting up of him who draws all people to himself, nothing is important.¹⁹

Sisters and brothers, remember what is important. *Y que Dios les bendiga.* And may God bless you. Amen.

¹⁹ G. F. Hedstrand, ed. *The Covenant Pulpit: Twelve Sermons for Christian Living* (Chicago: Covenant Press, 1954), 121.