

The Rt. Rev. J. Scott Mayer Ordination Sermon

Good morning. I bring greetings from the Diocese of Northwest Texas, the home of cities named Lubbock, Amarillo, Abilene, Midland, Odessa, and San Angelo, along with towns named Brownfield, Levelland, Plainview, and Shallowater – demonstrating that the early settlers had no illusions as to where they were. We even have one town named Earth, so literally 999 people can say, “I’m from Earth.” The diocese is a place of wide-open spaces, a big sky, beautiful canyons, and truly good people who, as they say, will ruin their own pick-up truck while pulling your pick-up out of the ditch.

I want to express my gratitude to Bishop Loya for inviting me to preach for this occasion. I suspect this gathering knows this already, but I’m going to say it for the record. Craig Loya is one of the most respected and admired bishops in the House of Bishops. Like any gathering of over 100 people, we have those who might consider coming to the microphone a little less often, and those we wish would speak more. Craig is in the latter category. His wisdom and insight and leadership are desired always. Thanks again, Craig, for this invitation.

I was planning to be here this morning, whether to preach or not. Deacon Matthew Roberts is one of ours. He can validate my description of west Texas and the Panhandle. I want you to know that in Matthew you will have a priest with a great mind and a life experience that will serve the Church well with empathy and compassion. Matthew, it’s my honor to be here today.

To all three deacons being ordained today (Nathan, Beth, and Matthew) it is a privilege to be a part of your lives on this significant day and follow you on your

journey. This gathering is an outward visible sign of our support for you. Already in this liturgy, you have heard the resounding responses that it is our will for you to be ordained, and we will support you in this ministry.

Thank you for saying “yes” to this call in these difficult – if not perilous – times. This is a beautiful and wonderful occasion today, and nothing can rob this celebration of its meaning and power. And yet, as you are being ordained, we are not imagining some future hypothetically challenging time down the road; we are in a new context now.

I wish this sermon today could be all “balloons and seashells,” but that would be less than honest. So again, thank you for saying “yes” to this call. Thank all of you – lay or ordained – who have said “yes” to the call to follow Jesus in the way of love.

In the Eastern Church it is claimed that there is only one Eucharist. One Eucharist, forever repeated; indivisible, it is constantly divided and shared, extending through time, one perpetual flow from the Last Supper to the Heavenly Banquet.

That is a beautiful image: one Eucharist extending through time, one perpetual flow connecting the Body of Christ, uniting all times and all places; all eternity – past, present, and future – gathered and connected in Holy Communion with God and one another.

When we gather for the celebration of the Holy Mysteries we are participating in Reality itself, and we are participating in God’s vision for the world: union, communion, Holy Communion with God and one another.

And obviously, this world cannot be described as “in communion.” That’s been true always. The Eastern metaphysic might say that we are blind to Reality, and in need of awakening. In the West we speak in terms of alienation, separation, or division. The root word for the word “devil” is “divider.” We are divided, and recently that has played out in your great state in shockingly significant ways.

A state known for natural beauty, the most polite baseball fans in Major League ball, images of Lake Wobegon and the Mary Tyler Moore Show, and of course, the artist formerly known as Prince – of all places in the United States – tragic violent events have affected not only you but have rippled out to change our country.

I’m one who claimed I did not believe in American exceptionalism, but every time I find myself thinking or saying, “I did not think that could happen here,” my true beliefs are exposed. It turns out, we are just like the rest of the world. Maybe, at least, that particular epiphany will be good for us.

We all do ministry in a context. In my context it’s very tricky to preach about politics. So, I have followed the beliefs and practices of the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Willaim Temple. William Temple claimed that being a Christian did not give us any special expertise around public policy. So, he encouraged the Church to preach principles – not policy. It seems that he broke his self-imposed rule on occasion – as have I. But I tend to preach principles and let the audience finish the sentence.

Having said that, there is something happening in this country and around the world, and it is affecting policy, and it doesn’t matter how cautiously a preacher

approaches all things political, this particular movement belongs in our wheelhouse – because it is a heresy.

Christian Nationalism is a heresy. When bishops are ordained and consecrated, we take vows to guard the faith. In today's reading from Ephesians, the Apostle Paul says, "we must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming." So, it falls to all of us to defend the faith.

I'm not talking about the relationship between church and state. I'm not a constitutional scholar. That's not my department. I am talking about a growing movement to hijack the faith.

We are learning more about the person who allegedly assassinated one of your state senators and her husband – and attempted others. It turns out that he was a preacher, and he is informed and shaped by a form of this heretical movement called the New Apostolic Reformation. This is not an innocent heresy about the number of angels dancing on the head of a pin. This heresy can lead to severely dangerous consequences – as any honest look at history will tell us.

At the last meeting of the House of Bishops, the Bishop of Atlanta, Rob Wright, made a presentation about Christian Nationalism. What follows here are a few of his observations.

Bishop Wright says: Christian Nationalism "is a spiritual force that seeks to hijack the identity of Jesus of Nazareth and then possess his Church." It "is

fundamentally at odds with the Gospel, but it is presented as harmonious with the Gospel.”

- “It is demonic, because it does violence to the trans-national, trans-ethnic vision Jesus inaugurated on Ascension Day.”
- “It is demonic, because it has succumbed to the devil’s last temptation of Jesus – the offer to exchange devil worship for control of worldly kingdoms.”
- “It is demonic, because Christian Nationalism is an apocalyptic call to a shrinking cohort to defend a fading vision of America as a white Christian nation.”

“This movement, he says, “is theologically illegitimate, and must be called by its proper name: idolatry, blasphemy, and heresy.”

Bishop Wright names it. And then – in his presentation – he moves to the Christian Witness. This morning, I bring to our attention two points.

First, HOW we respond is as important as WHAT we do. “To join God in the work of proclaiming good news, restoring sight to the blind, and seeking freedom for captives of all stripes, we need to abandon everything we bring to this THAT IS NOT LOVE.”

“All impulses to smallness, separation, and superiority; all the contempt and malice; all the deceit and fear needs to be abandoned. Darkness cannot purge darkness.”

And then he says this (the second thing I bring to our attention): “A persecutor of the faith today could be a chief apostle tomorrow.” A persecutor of the faith today could be a chief apostle tomorrow.

That is Gospel. That is the Good News of undeserved forgiveness, unmerited grace and mercy, and unconditional love – the Good News we have experienced; the Good News we are called to embody and proclaim.

When the angel stood before the shepherds and announced the good news of great joy, the child was born in a context. The people of Israel were living in desperate times politically. Rome occupied their land. They lost their freedom. They were taxed heavily. They functioned as the service industry for the Romans. And they interpreted their situation as a spiritual crisis.

Four familiar Jewish religious groups react to this spiritual crisis in four different ways: Sadducees, Essenes, Zealots, and Pharisees.

The Sadducees are the only ones disinterested in change. The Sadducees have some degree of wealth and status. They are willing to live with the status quo.

The Essenes. The Essenes want change, but they don’t see it happening within the culture, which they see as decadent and beyond hope. They drop out to seek holiness of life for themselves.

The Zealots. Zealots want change, but they’ve lost patience with peaceful methods; they are inclined to sporadic acts of resistance.

And then the Pharisees. Unlike the Sadducees, they want change. Unlike the Essenes, they are not dropping out. Unlike the Zealots, they will use peaceful methods. The Pharisees will strive to revitalize the faith. And they will do that by following strictly the Law of Moses. That's how they will restore the Jews to their proper place, and how they will cause change.

And Jesus, the One who heals someone on the Sabbath, and hangs out with tax collectors and sinners, says this: Love. Love God and love your neighbor. Embody and proclaim love.

We are talking here about the kind of love that forgives people while hanging from the Cross. Remember, nobody apologized first. Nobody confessed their sins. Nobody repented. This is undeserved forgiveness, unmerited grace and mercy, unconditional love. Love is what changes lives and changes the world. It is the only way.

When Rob Wright concluded his remarks to the bishops, he shared a quote from one of his predecessors. Bennett Sims fought the good fight during the Civil Rights Movement. In reflection, he says: "By many signs we are both pained and privileged to live on a great hinge of history."

Pained and privileged. We, too, are living on a great hinge of history. Maybe this is how we can think about this moment. We know the pain. And if we think about it, it is a privilege to be called by God to this moment.

After our three deacons (Nathan, Beth, and Matthew) are ordained to the Sacred Order of Priests, we will all gather around the Table to participate in the Holy

Eucharist. To the three being ordained, your newly unique way to participate in this Sacred Meal is a privilege indeed. It's all part of the same calling. Pain and privilege are part of the same calling.

Speaking personally for a moment – and perhaps speaking for this entire gathering – it is my privilege to serve in this calling at this moment in history with you. Our hearts are filled with gratitude today. Thank you for saying “yes.”

+J Scott Mayer, Northwest Texas
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Sources include Rob Wright, Marcus Borg, William Temple, and Jack Mayberry.