

Christine Wilke Ordination Sermon – February 24th, 2019

Rev. William G. Utke

A few years ago, I heard Diana Butler Bass, author, speaker, and independent scholar specializing in American religion and culture. She opened with a metaphorical story I would like to share this afternoon about the building of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge.

“The Chesapeake Bay Bridge is a major dual-span bridge connecting Maryland’s rural Eastern Shore with the urban Western Shore. The original span opened in 1952 at a length of 4.3 miles and was the world's longest continuous over-water steel structure. When the Chesapeake Bay Bridge opened it was so scary to drive across; people making the journey would become frightened and stop in the middle of the bridge, frozen by fear. This would tie up traffic and cause other problems. In response, the idea of bridge escorts was developed. Bridge Escorts were people with experience and training who would drive your car over the bridge, with you in it, and then return the driving duties on the other side.”

I like Bridge Escorts as an image for thinking about ministry, and this afternoon as we consider ordained ministry. We boldly proclaim we are the body of Christ and God has gifted each of us to participate in Christ’s ministry. Through the Rite of Ordination, the church authorizes and sets aside (*not above, and not below for that matter*) we set aside particular people with gifts, education, and experience as preachers, teachers and officiants of the sacraments. These people are called to guide the church and community as we cross the scary bridges around us.

Few would deny the church exists in scary times. We hear about decline of church membership. We are concerned about the constricting circumferences of sanctuary we are willing to provide brothers and sisters escaping trappings of poverty, violence and war. Family separations, a rise in hate groups, economic fluctuations, expanding prison populations, homelessness and hunger. We see groups of people indiscriminately excluded from travel and others from serving in the military. We live in an age when we need Bridge Escorts to ground us in God’s Hope and promises, to help us rebuild the foundation of God’s radical welcome and God’s bold willingness to love the least of these. We need bridge escorts who offer powerful stories of crossing from fear to faith.

As we think about the power of fear, there are moments fear provides an important caution to us; but even more often fear paralyzes the very word, or action, or response which God is calling us to bring into being. Yet, faith in God helps curtail immobilizing fear. It loosens fear’s grip and restricts its power enough that faith rises to the surface and empowers us to do justice, love kindness and journey humbly with God.

We need clergy and churches, with God-inspired courage, tenacious faith, and the boldness of Divine love; a love which comforts, and redeems, but also challenges systems which contaminate the growth of God’s Realm on earth. The Pastor, as bridge escort, helps all of us cross over from accepted altars of power, money, and control and claim faith stories which do

not presume men are of more value than women; the wealthy are more important than the poor; the satisfied are more important than the hungry; or those who can put on a happy face are more important than those who show grief.

Christine I am overjoyed this afternoon. You have invited us to gather with you and your cloud of witnesses, those who have crossed bridges with you, and you with them. Now you are being ordained into Christian Ministry in the United Church of Christ... one reason, because we can see how your journey has repeatedly demonstrated the ability of faith to curtail fear. I'll recall just a few examples...

There was a time when you were fearful of making a Sunday morning announcement in front of the congregation, the very thought made your insides crawl; but one day you made one, and over time another and another and soon, faith and practice curtailed fear. Now you preach weekly and speak regularly on behalf of God's love.

Then, you chaired Emanuel's Mission Committee and introduced an important justice ministry. Many of us leaders had no idea how this new idea would go over in the Congregation. Yet, gently and clearly you introduced us to Fair Trade-- using education and inviting participation, a monthly fair-trade sale began and set our church on course to use fair trade coffee for all our church gatherings. In new ways this ministry is still alive today.

Then you preached for the first time, it was right here at Emanuel. I was gone that morning, but I recently read where you confessed strong feelings of fear in anticipation of that morning. Yet in that sermon you became a witness of faith curtailing fear as you recognized God's presence through this congregation who served as part of your cloud of witnesses. Christine, you are an example to all of us when we say, "I can't do that," but have never really tried.

And today we see how you have developed an ecumenical and interfaith cloud of witnesses. Classmates and professors from Seminary and Clinical pastoral Education. The people of Plymouth Church UCC, Milwaukee, current and previous pastors Rev. Andrew Warner and Rev. Bridgit Flad Daniels. Treasured friendships with Rabbi Tiferet Berenbaum, and relationships through First Congregational UCC-East Troy, Raymond UCC and Union Grove UCC. And of course, the cloud has been constantly upheld and supported by the endless understanding and love of your family; husband John, Son Zach and extended loved ones. Every step of the way you and this cloud of witnesses leaned on each other - keeping God in the center - as you overcame obstacles and fear and became a witness to the power of faith.

Christine, as we sat sharing lunch a few weeks ago you told me you had agreed to become the Full Time Interim Minister at New Horizon UCC in Boltonville, I was excited... Now this congregation will be blessed. Through the Spirit of God you and they will grow in faith. Facing a time of pastoral transition is often an intense time of fear for a congregation. Yet, during this time between the times, you and our brothers and sisters at New Horizon will experience again how faith in God curtails fear, and together you will begin to write an exciting new chapter in ministry with them.

This is my prayer for you Christine, for all my colleagues, for all churches and spiritual houses, for each person whose heart is open in Love's name... May we join hands and by the power of God traverse the scary bridges together, listening for the joy and cheers of our great cloud of witnesses as we bring each other across the bridge, again and again, from fear to faith.

Amen