

Jimmy Bartz  
St. John's/ Jackson  
Christie Laughery's Ordination to the Diaconate  
John 15:7-11  
August 20, 2022, Bernard of Clairvaux

The power of habit can overtake us human beings without a real consciousness around it, and we can miss the Holy happening in our very midst. The orthopedist sets a leg as just a part of the day's work, while she unknowingly brings an end to acute crisis resulting from a traumatic accident and begins a healing process for her patient, while her parents come back down to earth breathing sighs of relief. The FedEx driver drops a package on the front porch, not knowing that inside the stuffed envelope is a dossier of a child in China matched with her adoptive parents who delight and cry over the first sight of their awaiting daughter with the enclosed picture. The butcher cuts a standing rib roast and places it in the case unaware that the meat will be prepared and served for loved ones gathering to remember and grieve a loving matriarch. A field hand cuts flowers that in just a few days will become part of bridal bouquet reminding a church stuffed with people that love comes again.

But not today. Today, a priest steps into a familiar pulpit to make commentary on favorite scripture knowing full well that this privileged role marks the ritualized beginning of ministry for a dearly loved disciple sparking the further spread of love around a valley already dripping with God's grace. Christie, thank you for this invitation. It's a blessing that I know and feel, and I'm grateful.

There is this tradition. Some of you know it already. There is this tradition among ordinands to associate with the saint upon whose day you are ordained. Today, as your bulletin indicates, the church remembers Bernard of Clairvaux. Bernard is a compelling figure in the history of the church. Not absent controversy, of course, like all humans,

including the saints, but nevertheless a compelling figure in Church History. Maybe y'all know this about him already. Some of you do.

So, if we were to follow the tradition closely, we might expect Christie to emulate in some way or at least find some connection to Bernard, as the church might expect me to emulate in some way or find some connection to John the Baptist. I suppose it's a good tradition, unless it's not.

I mean only to reflect on this in order to tell our ordinand here, I'm talking to you, Christie. I simply say all this so that you—intelligent, caring, compassionate, humorous, faithful, and in almost all ways kind Christie—I simply say this in order to encourage you, beloved Christie, to just do you. There is no need for you to emulate Bernard, or John or Mary or Martha or Brian or Paul-Gordon or Lynne or Dennis or Helen or Jimmy or any number of other folks as you take on this role in the church today, and tomorrow and the next. God made no mistakes when God made Christie—friend, veterinarian, daughter, disciple, and deacon. So, just do you.

Bernard said, “there are those who seek knowledge for the sake of knowledge—that is curiosity; there are those who seek knowledge to be known by others—that is vanity, and there are those who seek knowledge in order to serve—that is LOVE. You, Christie, are most definitely the latter installment of Bernard's classifications—learning in order to serve, embodying love all along the way. And, not but, and, mind you, Bernard also said “the road to hell is paved with good intentions,” so you and the rest of us will have to mind our steps, as we continue to do our very best to live into this God Love Life, as we continue to do our very best to embody that faith completely.

The church, in her wisdom, in celebrating this saint Bernard, you see what I did there, Dr. Laughery? The church assigns this piece from John's Gospel. It comes from a particular section of John's Gospel that scholars call, “The Farewell Discourse.” The teaching takes place after

the last supper and before Jesus' arrest. While these words most certainly are the parting words of Rabbi Jesus, they're also meant to be a transfer of power—letting his beloved know, and that beloved includes you and it includes me, letting his beloved know that the work of God in the world will belong to a partnership between lil ole you and lil ole me and the Holy Spirit. The work of embodying, the work of manifesting God's love in the world no longer belongs to Jesus but now belongs to his disciples—all of them, all of us.

We, Christians, can find this confusing. Do you mean to say, Jimmy, that we are to do the very works that Jesus did? I mean, I don't mean to say it, Jesus does, and he did. In the preceding chapter of this passage he says, "very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these." Not lil ole me, we reply. Yes, lil ole you, Jesus responds.

Back to our passage, this particular passage of Jesus' Farewell Discourse includes one of my favorite lines in all of The Biblical Narrative. I have a lot of favorites, but this one is a treasure. John's Jesus says, "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you, abide in my love." It's descriptive, compelling. It's directive. I even believe it's quite counter cultural, especially today.

Those of you who are around this church week in and week out might wonder what's so counter the culture about that line. We talk about love every week here and most weeks we talk about it a lot. It's love, love, love around here all the time, right? And it is!

But, it's not the love that grabs me. I mean it does, and it always does, but this directive that Rabbi Jesus gives. That's what grabs me. He says, 'Just as the Father has loved me, I have loved you.' And, then, he gives us this directive, "abide in my love." And, as I was thinking about that last week. Abide in my love. What does that really mean. And I began to reflect on this reality that in our culture today, for the most part,

we don't abide in anything. We don't linger or savor. We don't really wander or ponder. We don't revel or relish these days.

You see, there's this thing in our pocket or purse that buzzes and pings seemingly telling us to move on or look over there or get busy with something else. It's an incredibly useful tool that has a gargantuan shadow. Screens—the ones in our pockets and the ones on our walls and the ones on our desks and the ones on our laps direct us toward transactions, rather than relationships. There is no abiding with apple or Samsung or Dell or IBM.

And as I was thinking about what abiding in God's love really looks like, I can't help but think that is the work of the deaconate. The deacon identifies herself as an agent for God's love in the world. A little different than those of us locked up here around table turning water into wine and bread into body. The deacon turns the unconscious rhythms and routines of life, the hum drum, so to speak, into sacred moments by directing our attention toward the sacred in the mundane. The deacon doesn't walk the child across the street because the child isn't mature enough to cross safely. The deacon walks the child across the street because the living Christ in the form of a four year old presents on her threshold, and there is a chance to linger amidst the beauty of God come among us, Immanuel, as the story describes. It's not a conjuring or manifesting, it's recognizing and pointing out God's presence in the world for those of us who don't have eyes for the Kingdom or for those of us who've drifted a bit and need a navigational course back to the ever present reality of God's love in creation.

Doing that work requires an active abiding. What do I mean by that? I suppose we might correlate abiding and passivity, but I believe the abiding to which Jesus refers is active, you know? I suppose if I were to describe it physically, what abiding looks like spiritually, I would say that it resembles that first move in tree pose, arms spread, head tilted slightly toward the sky, chest out, heart wide open. The move is active, not passive, like the child's pose. I'm no yogi, of course, but I know the

move spiritually. In order for us to abide in God's love we adopt and active openness, so that we might encounter the Living Christ when the Living Christ presents. You, see, Dr. Laughery, to put it into your context, the deacon's role is not only to see the puppy in the arthritic, 12 year old hound, but also to show the world, too, that the puppy is still there, beautifully made, desirous of being rediscovered and celebrated.

So, Christie, I invite you to stand, as I invited Lynne to stand a bit more than a year ago, as I was invited to stand 23 years ago at my own ordination. There a few things I want you to remember. The first should come as no surprise. Christie, none of us expects you to be Bernard or Francis or The Baptist or Jesus or Mary or Susan or Suzanne or Lynne or Jimmy or Brian or Travis or Paul-Gordon. You are your deaconate are unique to you. God made things that way. And let me assure you, you are enough and beautiful and bright and wonderfully made. You do you and don't you dare dim your light. Let it shine.

Second. Follow the directive. Abide in His love. Do it because we probably won't. We need the deacon to remind us, and you are that deacon. Be patient with us. Remind us that it's active, not passive. Help us discover the beauty of abiding in God's love. Point out the Living Christ when we don't have eyes for the Kingdom to see him on our own. We are counting on you for this.

Third and maybe most important. Dear one, nobody bats a thousand. Nothing is perfect, except for God. The Church will disappoint you, and you'll probably disappoint the church, too. And, All of you. All of y'all. All of this is covered by grace. That most certainly includes you, Christie, even if you believe in your heart of hearts that BBQ is made from a pig. Nobody gets it all right, and everything's covered by grace. To quote a brilliant theologian, "the grade is always A." There is nothing you can do or not do. There is nothing you can say or not say that will ever separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus. So, swing for the fences.

That's it. Let's get to the ordainin' part of this dealio.