

Sermon for the Ordination of Matthew Rivers

The following sermon was given by the Very Rev. John B. Burwell, rector of Church of the Redeemer, Orangeburg, at the ordination to the priesthood of the Rev. Matthew Rivers on November 27, 2018 at St. John's Chapel, 18 Hanover Street in Charleston.

I want to begin tonight with two observations. Number one, I am a man of unclean lips.

By God's standards, I do not belong in this pulpit tonight. I'm grateful for His grace given as Christ apportioned it.

Number two: Matthew Rivers, while I thank you for asking me, I know that you could have done a whole lot better in your picking of a preacher. I can think of at least a half dozen people present here tonight who could do you a whole lot better job than I.

But be that as it may, let me say that I am incredibly honored to be your preacher at your ordination. Thank you for this opportunity. And to all of you who came tonight to join in this celebration – To our Bishops, to the clergy of this diocese, and to the St. John's Chapel family, I thank you. Thank you for agreeing to do all in your power to uphold Matthew in his ministry.

And Henrietta, God bless you and thank you for making all this possible tonight. You did make it possible. I like to tell anyone who'll listen that my ministry has been the blessing that is it because Sylvia Burwell is the blessing to me that she is. Matthew is blessed beyond measure to have you as his partner in this journey called life. Thank you.

Matthew, to my way of thinking, this evening you will be making the third most important commitment you've ever made in your life. The first was the "I do" that you said at your confirmation when you promised to follow Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior.

The second was the "I will" that you said when you took your Henrietta to be your wife.

The third most important commitment will come in a few minutes when Bishop Lawrence examines you in the presence of the Church, and you commit yourself to this awesome responsibility. This lifetime commitment to full-time service to the Lord.

Let's take a look at this thing called priesthood to which you are declaring your readiness and willingness so to do. The Scriptures chosen for tonight speak clearly to the subject. And I believe the first thing they tell us is about the calling. This is not a job – it's a calling.

It's all about the calling! Ordained Ministry – and the priesthood in particular - is not a job, Matthew, and you simply can't treat it like one.

In our Old Testament lesson we read of Isaiah's calling by God. And we also see Isaiah's reaction to that call. It's verse 8 – the last verse: "Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And what does Isaiah say?

He says, "Well, I *might* be interested. Do I have to work on the weekends? What's your insurance

package look like?”

Is that what he says? No, he says two words: “**Send me!**”

This is not a job, Matthew. You don't get to pick *when* you serve God. Or *where*. Or *how long*. It's not a job. Priesthood is a calling. *Vocare* in the Latin. First person singular – **I call**. The “I” is God. The Lord Almighty has called you. He has *chosen* you, Matthew Rivers. He's selected you to be a priest for his people. And you get to say two words in response to that call – Two words! “Send me!”

Tonight, we celebrate your call with a glorious ordination. Your friends and family and fellow presbyters and deacons are all here to wish you well. But in the years to come, I'm here to tell you that there will be many days ahead that will not be glorious.

Much of what you do as a priest will remain thankless. You will counsel people who may not always appreciate what you have done.

Sometimes you will speak and be misunderstood.

You will love and be rejected.

You'll save lives and be forgotten.

You will keep confidences and be betrayed by those you take into your confidence.

You will be accused of being that which you are not, and you will not be recognized for being that which you are.

You will make mistakes which will be too long remembered, and achieve victories that are too quickly forgotten.

You will turn out lights, lock up buildings, move chairs and tables, carry out garbage... maybe even clean commodes. You will seldom see the results of your work.

And as often as not, when the day is done, you won't even know that the day is done. Because there's still more to do.

That is the calling.

It wasn't all that long ago that I saw a commercial on TV for a stock brokerage firm, and in it, a young man about your age was saying how he was determined that he wasn't going to be like his dad. He said his father worked hard in a factory all his life, retired at age 65 and then died at age 68. The young man said he wanted to retire while he was still young enough to enjoy life.

But then I remember the time about 20 years ago when I saw Billy Graham on TV. He was on the *Larry King Live* show. Billy was still preaching at that time, and he was on Larry King to promote a Crusade he was getting ready to do.

Larry said, “Billy, when are you going to retire?” And Billy Graham looked puzzled.

He said, "Larry, I've looked and looked in the Bible, and for the life of me, I can't find one servant of the Lord who ever retired. I don't reckon I can."

And he never did.

Matthew, are you willing to spend the *rest of your life* in service to the Lord? Not because you have to, but because you want to?! Like Isaiah in the year King Uzziah died, God has said, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And tonight, YOU raise your hand. You say, "Here I am, Lord! Send me!" This is not a job, Matthew and you can't treat it like it is. It's a calling. It's all about the calling.

The scriptures tonight also show us that **it's all about the message**. *YOU*, Matthew, get to carry that message to the world, in your preaching and your teaching and in your presence among the people.

It's all about the message, and what is that message? *Hope!* Oh yes! With Jesus Christ there is hope for the future! There is hope because the Good Shepherd laid down His life, only to take it up again! Good Friday was followed by Easter!

Every Sunday we priests have the opportunity to speak the truth in love, and to prepare God's people for works of service. This opportunity begins with the good news – the truth that God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life – a plan called abundant life – life lived to the full.

But - if He has a plan for abundant life, why do so many people not experience it? Because, as Romans 3 points out, all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory. Human sin separates us and keeps us from loving God and enjoying Him forever.

And! As Romans 5 reminds us – while we were still in sin, Jesus died for us! His death on the cross restored the right relationship with God and humanity. No one else and nothing else could do what Jesus has done. He is the way, the truth and the life.

And so - when we receive Christ into our lives through faith - For it is by grace that you have been saved through faith – not by works – (that's Ephesians 2, as you know) – *when we make Jesus our Lord*, He lives in us and we in Him and we began the abundant life – life to the full – the wonderful plan for our lives that God wants to give us.

Have you heard that before? Do you know how long it took me to tell that good news message just now? One minute. I timed it. It took one minute to tell God's plan for the world – one minute! And Matthew - every time you preach, you can take a lot more than one minute! If you were on my staff you'd get to have up to 14 minutes! Heavens!

My point is, it's all about the message – God's great message for His world is that we are loved – and there is hope for the future! It's all about the call – It's all about the message.

It was 35 years ago now – I was in Ambridge Pennsylvania. And Terry Kelshaw - one of my seminary professors - grabbed me by both arms and stopped me in the hall. He said, "John, God has laid this on my heart to tell you. Preach the Word!"

I said, "Oh, I will, Terry. I will."

With almost a wild-eyed look in his eyes he shook me! He said – "John, listen to me. Listen to me - Preach the good news every single Sunday. Do it, and your church will grow!"

I have. It did. He was right.

Matthew – listen to me! Preach the Word!!!! It’s all about the message – preach the good news!
And Matthew – Thirdly – **It’s all about the people**. In just a few moments from right now, the Bishop will remind you of this fact. In his charge to you he will say, “Remember how great is this treasure committed to your charge. They are the sheep of Christ for whom he shed his blood. The Church and Congregation whom you will serve is his bride, his body.”

It’s all about the people.

My grandmother used to say that people don’t care what you know, until they know that you care. In all your ministry, my brother – In all of your life, let them know you do care. It’s all about the people.

I don’t need to tell you that there is a world of hurt out there. You see it every day. Shattered dreams, broken promises, Worry, fear, anxiety addictions - People barely hanging on to life. People wondering if even there is a God.

Jesus says “I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also.” It’s the most amazing thing in the world. If you’ll begin each day asking the Lord to let you minister to His people, He will *let* you! He’ll put these sheep of His pasture in your path.

Jesus calls you to minister to his people. It’s all about the people.

At my ordination, Rick Belser told me about a time he was out shrimping off the dock in the marsh behind his house on John’s Island. When he wasn’t looking, one of his daughters ventured out into the marsh grasses by herself, and she wound up getting stuck up to her waist in the pluff-mud. She was stuck, and she couldn’t get out. She hollered out for help, but at the same time said, Daddy don’t come in here after me - you’ll get all muddy too!”

It’s a good analogy of ministry, Matthew. The mud of life smells and it’ll get all over you - but God calls us to step out in it and to restore the stuck and the drowning.

The Good Shepherd has called you to minister among his sheep. He has called you to *pastor*, in the best sense of the word. It’s all about the people. Love the people whom our Lord puts in your path. Pastor them. Share in their joys and in their sorrows.

“Equip these saints for the work of ministry so that the body of Christ can be built up until we all reach unity in faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God, and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”

And now, my brother, would you please stand?

Matthew, God in His providence, is ordaining you to be a priest for Him. Understand, Matthew, that this is a call on your life. It is not a job. The Lord doesn’t need and He doesn’t want “hired hands.” **It’s all about the calling.**

Matthew, In His providence, God has gifted you with an ability to preach and teach. You’re a very good preacher and teacher right now and as you gain the wisdom that the years of service to this

calling will bring, you are going to be a great preacher and teacher. Remember that **it's all about the message**. It always has been and always will be. Preach the word. In season and out.

And Matthew, **it's all about the people**. Christianity, at its core is a relationship. All eternity will be a relationship. Pastor the people God will give you. Take your cue from the Good Shepherd. Know them and love them, just as the Father knows you and loves you.

Matthew, to each one of us, grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. It was He who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers. Prepare God's people for the work of ministry. Speak the truth in love.

And in all things, may we grow up into Him who is the Head, that is, Christ. That is what this is all about. May our God bless your ministry for Him in the years to come.

For the ministry He lets us share, for the grace He gives us, and for the cross by which we have been redeemed, we can all say, Thanks be to God!

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