

Charge to the Congregation—Keith Grogg
Ordination of Mary Elizabeth “Betsy” Ray
November 18, 2018, Black Mountain Presbyterian Church

Siblings in Christ

in Black Mountain Presbyterian Church, which in the Holy Spirit
has given sustenance to the shaping of Betsy’s Christian identity,
in Montreat Presbyterian Church, which in the Holy Spirit
has given voice to the formation
of Betsy’s preaching and serving identity,
in Old Fort Presbyterian Church, which in the Holy Spirit
has given life to Betsy’s pastoral identity,
and in all the congregations and ministries
whose paths have intersected with Betsy’s,

It is an honor to be invited to deliver the charge to our congregations.

There are two “boundary points” that discipline me in my approach to life and ministry every day.

The first is from the end of the book of Job, where God has come to judge the personae in the story. Not to recap the whole book, but Job had had three so-called friends come to him in his undeserved suffering, and they offered rotten, blame-the-victim kinds of counsel which were apparently based on the most sophisticated conventional-wisdom theology of the time.

Meanwhile Job had had the chutzpah to hold God to account regarding the atrocities that had befallen him.

In Job 42:7, God says to one of the friends, Eliphaz the Temanite, “My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends; for *you have not spoken of me what is right*, as my servant Job has.”

I am also disciplined by something I read about several years ago. Indiana University's men's basketball program at one time had many lofty achievements year in and year out. In later years, not so much.

One year when they were at their nadir, it was the very beginning of another season, and they had a rag-tag team without much talent and almost no hope of being able to do anything. So the coaches brought in some of the players from the glory days to give this obviously overwhelmed, undertalented team kind of a "pep talk" before their first game. I had figured they would come in and go, "Come on, guys, you can do it! Just pull together and do your best!"

Instead, their pep talk consisted of three words: "Don't embarrass us."

I think of both of those boundary points for my own ministry every day, and particularly now, as I see and hear evidence that dedicated, faithful, churchgoing Christians are facing enormous temptations in our present context to judge the relevance of the message of the Good News by how well it conforms to outside sources.

Surely, our message *is* refined
by being tested against external perspectives
and subjected to constant reality checks.

But in the Spirit of God's statement to Job's friends
and the message given in that locker room,

I am reminded that
neither the bar for determining what is good and right and true,
nor the parameters of what needs to be said and heard
and wrestled with and reckoned with in our churches,
are set by Fox News or MSNBC or CNN or talk radio
or any other opinion-based media.

You know, O mortals, what is good:
 And what does the LORD require of you but to do justice,
 and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?ⁱ

Which commandment is the first of all?

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,
 and with all your soul, and with all your mind,
 and with all your strength.

And the second is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

There is no other commandment greater than these.ⁱⁱ

“And who was a neighbor?” asked Jesus.

“The one who showed mercy.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Jesus said: I give you a new commandment: that you love one another.

Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.^{iv}

Neither the cultured despisers of religion^v on the Left
 nor those desperate to hold onto the idolatrous false power
 of race and privilege on the Right
 are the arbiters of whether the Word of God and its ramifications
 are appropriate or applicable,
 let alone true, let alone beautiful;
 and it never makes a claim to be reasonable.^{vi}

In 2010, Kenda Dean wrote in *Almost Christian*,^{vii}

“Afraid of being branded as religious zealots..., many American churches have overcompensated, setting the bar low for religious commitment of any kind, tending God’s garden with forks and spoons when tractors and backhoes are in order.”

Annie Dillard wrote in *Teaching a Stone to Talk*,^{viii}

“On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke?”

She said, “It is madness to wear [straw hats and velvet] to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping [God] may wake someday and take offense, or the waking [God] may draw us out to where we can never return.”^{ix}

Julie Polter (of Sojourners) has written:

“We speak of God’s truth in a time of lies...

We bind up the wounded.

We throw our bodies and reputations into the oppressive cogs.

We burn with righteous anger, as we should,

but also with love beyond understanding.”^x

The charge we are given is to be the Church of Jesus Christ,
animated by the Holy Spirit,

commissioned and empowered

by the voice of our good, gracious, benevolent God,
accountable to those in the Communion of Saints

who came before us, who live in the world around us,
who will one day look back

on us, and what we did or said, or didn’t do or didn’t say,
and are encouraging us from the crowd, from the sidelines,
and from somewhere deep within, saying:

Come on, Church, you can do it: make us proud. ■

ⁱ Micah 6:8

ⁱⁱ Mark 12:28-31

ⁱⁱⁱ Luke 10:36-37

^{iv} John 13:34

^v Friedrich Schleiermacher’s phrase from *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (1799)

^{vi} I concede this may be an arguable point. For example, Isaiah 1:18 is translated “Come, let us reason together!” as often as it is translated “Come, let us argue it out!” but in any case is about God washing away the stain of the sins of God’s people, if only they will “cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow” (1:16-17). It is not about the Word of God being “reasonable.”

^{vii} New York: Oxford University Press, 2010

^{viii} Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters* (HarperCollins Kindle Edition, 2007), 176.

^{ix} Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, 53.

^x Quoted without context in “Verse & Voice 11.16.18,” a daily email reflection from Sojourners (sojo.net). Polter is a managing editor of Sojourners.