

Why We Ordain

Today we bring you the powerful sermon preached last weekend in Belleville, Illinois, at the ordination of Candice Stone (whose writing appeared in [Thursday Theology #789](#)). The sermon was preached by Candice's mentor and pastor, Ron Neustadt. In it, Ron gets straight to the heart of why we bother ordaining people—what we ordain them to do, and why we so desperately need them to do it.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

Ordination of Candice Wassell Stone St. Mark Lutheran Church, Belleville, Illinois John 20:19-23 August 9, 2014

Today we are doing a rare thing. In fact, before today, it has happened only once ever in the 38-year history of this congregation.

The rare thing we are going to do is that we are going to ordain someone to the ministry of Word and Sacraments. What that means is that Bishop Roth, representing the whole church, will consecrate Candice Wassell Stone for a particular function—to speak Good News to us and to the world—and to speak it over and over again.

Not just *any* good news, mind you, but specifically honest-to-God good news—good news that addresses our deepest longings and our deepest problem—the God-sized problem we have that comes from forever wanting to trust in ourselves rather than in the God who

created us and loves us.

That's what we are ordaining Candice to do. And to do that ordaining, Bishop Roth will do as bishops have done for hundreds of years. He will place his hands on Candice's head and he will confer upon her the office of pastor.

Now, Candice is a particularly gifted woman. In fact, she is one of her generation's brightest and best. For starters, she is a scholar, which is to say, when it comes to matters important, she is not in the business of making things up.

And she has equipped herself with the tools of the trade. She has studied the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions and the history of the church. She knows New Testament Greek (and a little bit of Hebrew). But she can also communicate in Facebookese. And she can relate as well to elders and to children as she does to her own generation. She's energetic and conscientious and seemingly tireless. And she has a super sense of humor. In fact, she has all those personality traits that congregations typically say they want in a pastor.

Not only that, like others before her who have been ordained in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, she has been through a certification process that some say St. Paul himself probably would not have survived.

But, most importantly of all (at least for my money), she's a solid theologian. (And, if you don't want to take my word for it, I think you would get that same opinion from Dr. Ed Schroeder, who knows a theologian of the cross when he hears one.)

And yet, for all of that, this day is not about Candice—and Candice herself would probably be the first to tell you that.

In fact, it's not just today, but it's the entire office into which she is being ordained that is not about her. It's not as if her ordination is somehow a reward for something she has accomplished. Nor is it that she is being given some authority that the rest of us do not *already have—all of us, ordained or not*.

Candice, theologian of the cross that she is, would be the first to tell you that. And it is *true. All of you* have already been given the same authority to do what we are today ordaining Candice to do.

The trouble is, so often we don't use the authority we've been given. That is to say, so often we do not speak to one another the Promise that God has made to us through Jesus the Christ. So often we don't forgive one another. So often we "retain" the sins of one another instead of forgiving them. We let people stew. We keep our mouths shut. And the result is that grudges get held—and relationships get broken—and wars get fought... And we die.

Sometimes people live their *entire lives* and die without ever having been able to take the deep breath of relief that comes from hearing the Good News that their sins have been forgiven. And sometimes that's because *we* are the ones who could have spoken those words, but haven't.

Worse yet is the *reason* we do not always forgive—and that's because we don't always trust God's promise to us (in Jesus) that God desires to forgive *us*. Even when others *do* speak God's word of forgiveness to us, we do not always trust it.

And then we have an *even bigger* problem. In fact, that's when we have a God-size problem. Because if we don't *trust* God's promise of forgiveness—we don't *have* forgiveness. God can offer it until God is blue in the face, but if we do not make use of the offer

by trusting God, how can we have anything but ourselves—and that will get us only so far.

That's why we need Jesus—who was put to death for offering us God's forgiveness, *and whom God raised from the dead* for doing so in spite of our not always trusting him!

We need this crucified and risen Jesus precisely because we are so much like those disciples we just heard about in the Gospel reading. Remember the situation? They were sitting *behind locked doors* even though two of those disciples had been to the tomb earlier that day and found it empty! And even though Mary Magdalene had told them she had spoken with Jesus and he had told her: Go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and *your* Father, to my God and *your* God.'

Jesus had wanted them to hear the good news that they were as dear to God as he was, and to believe it. But apparently the disciples did not believe that God had stood behind this forgiving Son of his. His resurrection meant that His Father was *their* Father, too. His God was *their* God, too. He had been put to death for making that Promise to them—and now he had been raised. His resurrection was their assurance of that.

It is our assurance, too. Jesus was willing to do whatever it took to get it across to us that God loves the world and each one of us that much. It's a promise he made with every breath he had. And God backed up that promise by raising Jesus from the dead.

Mary (the first to be "ordained," if you will) delivered that message.

But apparently the disciples did not believe it. Because there they sat that evening. With all the doors locked. Afraid. How could they be anything else but afraid if they did not trust the

message? How could they even breathe in that stifling room with all their fear?

It was not until Jesus came into that locked room and showed them the death-wounds he had received for offering the forgiveness of God to all—and breathed on them—that they, too, could begin to breathe freely again.

That's why we do what we are doing today. That's why we ordain. Because God has graciously provided a way for Jesus and his promise to come to us *today*.

And we know how much like those disciples we are. We ordain because we know that we need Jesus to come to us—again and again—and to breathe on us his words of peace and forgiveness, and to give us the courage to offer that forgiveness to others as well.

So we ordain you today, Candice, because we want you to bring Jesus to us. We trust his Promise, but at the same time, we also keep trusting in ourselves, so we need to hear him again and again. We need his breath so that we can live and forgive, and not just exist. So bring Jesus to us, Candice.

And when we imagine that we do not need the Promise he offers us, remind us again of why he is so *necessary*. In plain words, Candice, speak God's other word to us as well. Speak God's law to us so that we do not deceive ourselves. Be honest with us about God's judgment of us, lest we end up trusting ourselves and fail to make use of the promises he died to offer us.

And then tell us again why Jesus is so good. And show us! Show us by administering Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper and the Office of the Keys according to His Promises.

We know, of course, that this is exactly what each one of us is

called to do for one another, but we also know how much we are like those disciples—and we cannot leave something this important up to chance.

So bring the Promise to us, Candice. Bring Jesus to us. That's what we ordain you to do. Nothing else. NO ADD-ONS. NO SUBSTITUTIONS.

And, finally, keep in mind how dear to God *you* are on account of Jesus *who loves you and gives you eternal comfort and good hope* (to paraphrase your confirmation verse from 2 Thessalonians).

And know that we will pray for you—and we ask that you pray for us: **Fill us, O God, with your Holy Spirit. And continue to breathe your Holy Spirit into Candice and all of us so we can breathe freely and speak your Word to one another, forgive one another, and bring your Promise to the world that you love so dearly. Amen.**