

Installation of Julian Gordy as bishop of the Southeastern Synod
Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson
October 14, 2007

Isaiah 42:5-9

2 Corinthians 4:1-12

Mark 10: 42-45

Grace to you and peace in the name of our crucified and risen Christ. Amen.

Julian, Morgan, family members, people of God of the Southeastern Synod, and ecumenical guests, it is a great honor, joy, and privilege for Ione and me to be with you today. As Julian is installed as a bishop of this whole church, I have the opportunity on behalf of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, to say express gratitude for the ways each of you lives out your baptismal faith in daily life. Thanks be to God for each of you and for the ministries of the congregations in this synod, places of specialized ministry, ecumenical partners, and global companions. I often am asked, “What is the state of the ELCA today?” I say that “I may be the last to know, but come with me to the Southeastern Synod and we’ll find out.” The state of the ELCA is alive in Christ.

Today we need to say a special word of thanks to one group of people that had just begun to appreciate the many gifts that this synod has seen in Bishop Gordy—the members of St. Andrew’s Lutheran Church in Franklin, Tennessee. Please stand and receive the thanks of this assembly for giving your pastor to be the pastor of this synod. [Applause].

I was not able to be at your synod assembly to express gratitude on behalf of this church for the ministry of Ron Warren. We started “baby bishop boot-camp” together in 1995. You brought a passion for the Great Commission to that beginning and it permeated your twelve years of ministry. It clearly has permeated your leadership and inspired your longing that we be a missional church. God’s blessings to you and Neva as you take up new callings and share your gifts of faith in the ministry of this church.

Julian, you’ve chosen themes of servant leadership as the texts for this day. I have to confess, I don’t really like that theme, but since you chose it and Jesus spoke about it, I think I better preach about it! I push away from it because servant leadership has become so all-pervasive a phrase in our society that it seems now to mean whatever the one using it chooses.

You bring to this call particular gifts that will frame servant leadership in new ways. Those gifts first are the ones you bring as a lover of music and musician. You told me that your first exposure to the Lutheran church was at age nineteen while playing the organ at Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, an LC-MS congregation, in Macon, Georgia.

Why do I think music is so essential for servant leadership today? Music is so important because servant leadership calls for evangelical improvisation. Jesus was engaged in evangelical improvisation in this conversation. Although we only have the end piece, you who know the rest of this story understand that Jesus was confronting

James and John who said, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.’ And he said to them, ‘What is it you want me to do for you?’”¹

Julian, there will be great temptation for that to become the melody line of your leadership. You will say, “What do you want me to do for you?” as you welcome a pastor into your office who is there to tell you that he or she would like you to find another call for them.

When you enter a congregational council meeting, there will be prayer and conversation before you get around to asking, “What is it you want me to do for you?” They will say, “We’d like you to resolve the conflict that has been simmering in this congregation for twenty-five years.” Then churchwide colleagues will come. You will talk and you will say, “What is it you want me to do for you?” They will say, “We would like you to increase mission support.” Jesus’ response to the request of James and John, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory”² began his evangelical improvisation. Jesus first declared the limits of his servant leadership. Setting limits calls for great improvisational skills and is one of the greatest challenges in servant leadership today.

There are incredible expectations on pastors today in our consumer-driven religious marketplace. The expectation is that if the pastor doesn’t meet the needs of the parishioners as religious consumers, they will look for another place where their needs can be met. They expect pastors to be dynamic preachers, charismatic personalities, and riveting teachers that can hold the rapt attention of confirmands who were raised on Sesame Street and MTV, have been at school all day, then at sports or music practice, and are less interested in the Small Catechism than text messaging on their cell phones. Pastors also are supposed to be generous givers, no matter how much seminary debt they carry. Pastors are to be sensitive providers of pastoral care. They are to be at the hospital room at five in the morning to pray with the person having surgery—even though no one told the pastor that person was having surgery. How, in the midst of all of those expectations, are pastors able to exercise servant leadership that allows them to set limits?

Jesus was very clear in responding to James and John when he said, “To sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant.”³ Jesus shows he is adept at evangelical improvisation because he turns their needs into a conversation about God’s work. He talks about his suffering and death and the road to discipleship. “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?”⁴ In other words you need me to grant you positions of power and authority, but God needs you to follow me on the way to the cross, through the cross, on to the resurrected life, and then back into the world to be God’s people for the sake of justice, mercy, and peace.

Julian, your greatest challenge may be to turn conversations that seem preoccupied with the needs of the questioner into imaginative conversations about what God needs in this time from the people whom God has equipped with gifts of the Spirit and with the proclamation of the Gospel.

When I asked Julian why he chose these three lessons for today he responded by saying, “Because they convey the theme of servant leadership and the ministry of justice

¹ Mark 10:35-36, NRSV

² Mark 10:37, NRSV

³ Mark 10:40, NRSV

⁴ Mark 10: 38, NRSV

and mercy to which the church is called. It's my hope that the Southeastern Synod will come to be known for its proclamation of the Gospel and its advocacy on behalf of the poor and the voiceless in our community and the membership of our synod will come to mirror the rich diversity found within its geographical boundaries."⁵ There it is. That's the melody line in your servant leadership around which you will be called to exercise great evangelical improvisation. In other words, you always will be inviting people out of their preoccupation with their needs, into prayerful discernment and holy imagination about what God needs from them.

Just think how prepared you and Morgan are for that kind of leadership. Since Hurricane Katrina you have been models of evangelical improvisational servant leadership. You have had to balance how much to immerse yourselves in a new call while assessing what was needed of you in relationships on the Gulf Coast to rebuild lives and communities. Then, just as you began to settle in a new call, people started coming to you and whispering in your ear, "Julian, I think you have gifts for leadership in the office of bishop." You said, "No, no, no." Morgan, you used your gifts of healing, listening, and organizing to help the Gulf Coast rebuilding process as you were hearing and discerning God's call to the ministry of Word and Sacrament. You know the arts of evangelical improvisation for the sake of God's mission in the world.

My colleague, John Thomas, President and General Minister of the United Church of Christ, gave one of the most marvelous lectures I've ever heard contrasting what kind of leaders God's mission needs today with what kind of congregations need pastors. He suggests that God's mission needs leaders who are "poets, literal poets in some cases, but perhaps in most cases leaders equipped to use language and symbol, liturgy and song, ritual and sacrament, silence and dance to help us imagine a world that is more than marketplace, to claim a life that is profoundly connected and communal, to see the world and one another as mystery to be worshiped rather than objects to be consumed. Poets and liturgists are today's evangelists who enable us to sense the improvisational God revealed in Jesus Christ and lure us into the company of those who are no longer satisfied with consuming or with living as competitive strangers to one another."⁶

Julian, everything I've heard about you and the gifts that people affirm within you are that you are such a poet, you are such an evangelist. Could evangelical improvisation be another way of inviting us to live in God's imagination? We spend much more time today talking about God's will. Many people are absolutely certain they know God's will. We Lutherans say we can never know for certain what God is doing in the world, but paradoxically, that God expects us to be part of it.

So where do we begin? We begin at the foot of the cross. Yes, we need to discern God's will, but we need also to learn how to live in God's holy imagination—the imagination that Isaiah described about a God who imagined both the beauty and wonder of creation and the giftedness of life that we call grace. God's imagination led God to choose a particular people and bind God's self to them with a covenantal promise. God then said, "Now, go be a light to the nations and strive for justice for all people." God's awesome imagination led God, out of love for a broken and sinful humanity, to say,

⁵ Bishop-elect Julian Gordy. Taken from an e-mail message sent to Presiding Bishop Hanson.

⁶ John Thomas, *Pontiff, Prophet, Poet: What Kind of Leaders Will We Require?*, address delivered to the annual consultation of the United Church of Christ in San Antonio, Texas, February 2002, p. 7.

“Well, I’m going try something else. I’m going to become one of them in Jesus the Christ.” Then God’s daunting imagination said, “I’m going to take the cross, the symbol of Roman empirical power, and turn it into a sign of life-giving salvation and healing for the world.”

Jesus had such imagination that he stood with his disciples and broke bread and said, “Take and eat, this is my body. Take and drink from this cup; it is my blood shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sins.” Jesus had such imagination that he gathered up his band of followers—doubters, sinners, and tax collectors like us—and said, “You are my body. You are broken and formed as a eucharistic community. You will be Christ in the world. You will be Christ to your neighbor.”

Dwelling in God’s imagination calls not only for evangelical improvisation, but also evangelical perseverance. Paul, writing to that fledgling young church in Corinth, calls upon a discouraged people not to give up, but instead to exercise evangelical perseverance, for we have this ministry in clay jars. This ministry comes not from us, but from the power of Jesus Christ dwelling in us. Jesus encouraged them not to deny the realities—we are afflicted in every way, perplexed, struck down, and we carry in the body the death of Jesus—but he always shared the good news that we proclaim—not ourselves—but Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as slaves for Jesus’ sake, for we have this treasure in clay jars.

What is this treasure that sustains us with evangelical perseverance when we become discouraged in ministry? It is the treasure of the Gospel. It is the good news that God in Christ has reconciled the whole creation to God’s self, not counting our trespasses against us, and now has entrusted us with that ministry and message of reconciliation.

Julian, you have been called to be a servant of this Gospel. The most formative experience in leadership I have ever had occurred in 1970 while I was in seminary. I promised Ione that we would live on the prairies of North Dakota where she had been raised and I, having been raised in the city, wanted to appreciate the open spaces. The congregation figured out very quickly that this seminarian knew nothing about farming and ranching. Fritz and Joanne Schwartz said, “Every Tuesday morning, come out with your blue jeans and work boots on and we’ll teach you about real life.” I showed up one morning at five o’clock and Fritz said, “Mark, today I want you to go out and get those sheep in the field and bring them in because we need to separate some of them.” Can you fathom what it was like for an urban seminarian studying in New York to be a pastor to be called to be a real live shepherd with real live sheep? I confronted that grazing flock of sheep and suddenly realized one thing: Fritz never told me how you get sheep to follow.

So what do we young leaders do when the flock doesn’t seem to want to follow our leadership? We call attention to ourselves. I started jumping up and down and shouting, “Here sheep, come on.” I turned and starting running back down the road. I turned around to look back and not one had even looked up from grazing. I had had a couple of courses on leadership where I learned the importance of finding the brightest lay leader in the congregation. So I looked for the brightest sheep, got down on my knees, and started to push. The sheep took about three steps and started grazing again.

How do we lead when we seem to be failing? We do not ask for help. We resort to public shaming of the flock. “You stupid sheep! I am here to lead you and you are not following.” Just before I had the humility to go back and ask Fritz how to get sheep to follow, I saw a bucket of feed by the fence. I took the bucket and put a little feed on the

path. A few sheep began to nibble and follow. I put down a little more feed and a few more began to eat and follow. Pretty soon the sheep began to eat and follow. Pretty soon I began to run and the sheep would eat and follow.

I have never forgotten, Julian, that the principle call to leadership is to lead the flock by feeding. Feed the Gospel of Jesus Christ proclaimed in Word poured open in Sacraments. Preach the Gospel of God's grace, mercy, and forgiveness to those who preach it to others. Speak God's word of forgiveness to us so that we can speak it to others.

You are called to persevere as an evangelist, but servant leadership also calls for evangelical resistance. That's a little harder and requires courage. You may know the name Ron Heifetz. He is one of the most gifted writers on leadership in the world today. He has been in front of huge crowds of business, government, education, and religious leaders. I heard him asked one day, "Dr. Heifetz, what is the most common characteristic among all the leaders with whom you work today?" He didn't miss a breath when he said, "The meltdown of courage."

Julian, may the Holy Spirit give you evangelical courage. The courage to confront white racism and say, "No, this is not how God imagines God's people living together—where white folks in their privilege—almost always unrecognized privilege—can continue to extract so much benefit on the backs of persons of color." Have the courage to lead us to confront the huge disparities between those who live in prosperity and those who live in poverty and say, "No, this is not how God intends for God's children to live, since all bear the image of God." Have the courage to call us together and to stop our consumptive living that is destroying God's fragile yet interdependent creation. Call us to sustain life rather than destroy it. Evangelical resistance gave Jesus the courage to say to John and James, "No, leadership is not about dominating and exploiting, it's about serving."

On Will Herzfeld's last trip to Africa, he witnessed the HIV and AIDS pandemic and saw the devastation of civil wars, the mutilation of women, churches refusing to recognize the gifts of women or ordain them, he called for us who have been marked with the cross of Christ forever to engage in acts of evangelical defiance. Julian, help us imagine what courageous yet humble acts of evangelical defiance might look like—not for our sake but for the sake of God's reconciling love and justice for the whole world.

The Southeastern Synod really is a foretaste of the church to come and what I believe the ELCA must become. If we are not vibrant and vital in God's mission in this part of the country, we do not have a great future. I'm not saying that we should become more racially and ethnically diverse to make the ELCA survive. If we are convinced that in God's holy imagination we are absent what God intends for us—the life and the gifts and the wisdom of the other—then we are open to evangelical possibilities of improvisation for the sake of God's mission.

Julian, may the Holy Spirit sustain you with humility and courage so that your servant leadership might be marked by evangelical improvisation, perseverance, and even defiance. Amen.