

## **In the Beginning: A Sermon on the Occasion of Kelly Kahlstrom's Ordination**

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In the beginning was the dance, and the dance was with God, and the dance was God. Light danced with darkness, day danced with night, evening danced with morning. The earth danced with the sea, flying creatures danced with swimming creatures, and humanity danced with God and with the rest of creation. In the beginning was the dance, and the dance was relationship, and relationship was holy.

In the beginning was language, the ability to communicate, the heart of all connections between people, the foundation of our very humanity. And language was with God, and language was sacred. All human things came into being through language. All human worlds were built on and with and by language. In the beginning was language, and language was relationship, and relationship was holy.

In the beginning was joy, and joy was with God, and joy was transcendent: joy that God was, joy that anything existed at all, joy at the infinite possibilities laid out at the dawn of time. Joy at God's creativity, joy at human creativity, joy at the capacity to communicate and dance and love. In the beginning was joy, and joy infused relationship, and relationship was holy.

We are here today to celebrate joy and language and the great dance in which we participate. We are here to honor the sacred nature of relationship in which joy and language and dancing live and move and have their being. Most importantly, we are here to appreciate and lift up our beloved Kelly Kahlstrom, whose ordination is indeed a most fitting response to the holy experience of relationship.

I met Kelly at the Iliff School of Theology in 2010 when we were among the trail-blazing guinea pigs entering the first year of the hybrid MDiv program, and while both of us have been through a range of adventures and challenges since then, two things have not changed in the past 12 years: my delight in our friendship and Kelly's core commitments: to the great dance in which we all participate, to the power of language to restore and heal and build community, and to the joy at the center of all things. Today, as I reflect on the Scriptures Kelly has chosen for this occasion, I do so with deep joy as well as with a solemn appreciation for the power of language. Words can wound as well as heal, destroy as well as create, and foster hate as well as love. May these words serve to heal, create, and foster love.

Psalm 121 assures us that our help comes from the holy as we lift our eyes to the hills. Paul Tillich referred to our experiences with the sacred as the vertical dimension of our lives, that place where we find depth and where we encounter what Tillich called ultimate concern and the ground of our being. As Tillich also observed, we live in a society where it is quite possible to opt out of engaging with the vertical dimension, focusing instead only on the horizontal dimension of life with other people.

Choosing to opt into engaging with the sacred takes courage, vulnerability, humility, and a willingness to cultivate an ever deeper and more trusting relationship with the one who keeps our

lives. While this is true whether we are ordained or not, seeking ordination makes special demands on the ordinand. Perhaps it's not entirely fair or ideal that this should be the case, but ordained clergy are expected to represent God to those they serve. Many people look to clergy members as embodied reminders of God's grace, love, welcome, forgiveness, and compassion. All of us have a responsibility to be the incarnation of the sacred in this broken and beautiful world, but it's assumed of the clergy in a way, and to a degree, that is often not true for the rest of us.

Particularly in her work as a hospice chaplain, Kelly will need to be the face, the voice, the hands, the presence of the holy. Fortunately, Kelly's integrity, compassion, self-awareness, and commitment to using language for good rather than evil will enable her to be a bearer of the vertical dimension in settings where life and death are far more than words or ideas. Kelly's presence as a chaplain will model the ways in which her help comes from the holy, and will invite others into that same understanding, regardless of the specific beliefs or language people use. In this way, Kelly will bring the vertical dimension into the horizontal dimension of life and especially of death.

Micah 6:8 reminds us of another way that the vertical dimension of life enters its horizontal dimension by linking the humility of vertical life with the justice and kindness that horizontal life demands if it is to enable all people to flourish. Justice and kindness are sometimes counterposed when people consider this verse from Micah, but I understand them as deeply connected. Working for justice is a way of being kind to people we will never meet, those we have the luxury of ignoring or rejecting. Moreover, justice work is a way of being humble in the face of the circumstances and needs of the least of these, a way of responding in both humility and outrage to the immorality of their mistreatment and the ways in which that mistreatment damages their ability to flourish.

Today, justice is most usefully understood not as an abstract principle that requires treating everyone equally regardless of their situation, but rather as a way of living out God's preferential option for the poor, the despised, the devalued, the disenfranchised, and the marginalized. Jesus's preferential option for the poor emerged both from his own life circumstances and from his commitment to the prophetic strand of Judaism within which he emerged and which he carried on. If Kelly's work as a chaplain will call for a great deal of kindness, it will also afford her opportunities to do the work of justice, as she has done for so many years in her professional life as well as her personal life. She will be asked to hold gently the paradox of treating all people kindly while serving as an instrument of justice for those people who need more than kindness to get to have good lives and, in some cases, good deaths.

There's one other important reminder for us in the Micah reading, though we may pay less attention to it if we focus only on Micah 6:8. Micah 6:8, of course, asks a question, but it is also a response to a set of questions. (As an aside, being of Jewish heritage myself, I love how Micah answers one set of questions with another question, but that's a topic for another day.)

I imagine the questions of Micah 6:6-7 being asked less out of curiosity and more out of anxiety. In Micah 6:2, we read that God has a controversy with God's people and will "contend" with Israel. Some Biblical scholars suggest that the first verses of Micah 6 describe a "covenant

lawsuit” in which God sues Israel for breach of contract of the Mosaic covenant, due to Israel’s failure to live out and live into justice, kindness, and humility. For me, the questions in verses 6 and 7 can be read as a desperate plea for instructions on how to fix the mess that Israel is in, with a marked preference for a fix that involves rituals and sacrifice, obeisance and burnt offerings. According to Micah, God nixes that option. God wants no more, and no less, than justice, kindness, and humility. As much as people need and depend on rituals to make sense of the world and understand our place in it, we are invited here to something much simpler and often much harder. When we are tempted to hide behind our rituals or make a big deal about our sacrifices, we have only to remember Micah’s question that answers the other questions, his question that we cannot answer with words but to which we must respond with our own works of justice, kindness, and humility.

Finally, we come to John 1: 1-5, the call to the great dance of life and being and mystery. In the beginning was the vertical dimension, the heights and depths, the ground of our being, and from it emerged the horizontal dimension, our being as selves in relationship with one another and with that sacred undergirding. John’s liturgy points back to the beginning of time while also pointing forward to the life and death of Jesus as an intersection of the vertical and horizontal dimensions.

In Jesus’s command to love God and neighbor, and in his ministry of teaching, healing, feeding, and otherwise tending to his own neighbors while deepening his relationship with the sacred, we find a model for meeting the divine by engaging with humanity. We also learn that as we encounter the divine, we will be called to engage with and serve humanity in ever deeper ways. That service has taken many forms for Kelly throughout her life; in her hospice chaplaincy, she will invite those with whom she works to encounter that intersection of the horizontal and vertical dimensions where life and death meet, struggle, and make peace with one another.

Those of us with progressive Christian perspectives are often more comfortable talking about Jesus’s life, ministry, and vision of God’s Commonwealth than we are talking about his death, a cruel, unjust execution by an imperial occupying army that killed easily without a thought or care. But the cross represents another intersection of the vertical and horizontal dimensions, one that reminds us of the ugliness and violence possible in the absence of justice, kindness, and humility.

Historically speaking, one of the things we know for sure about Jesus’s life is that it ended with Rome’s version of capital punishment. Today, Jesus’s life and his death invite us to struggle against the crosses of our own time and place, the thoughtless, careless devaluing of others that leads to their suffering and too often to their deaths. Those of us who are white and well-off in the US are especially invited to take up God’s preferential option for the poor by working to end the modern crucifixions of poverty, hunger, homelessness, police and vigilante violence, and indeed the death penalty itself if we carry Jesus’s crucifixion to its logical conclusion. All of us are invited similarly to struggle against white supremacy, male supremacy, heterosexual supremacy, Christian nationalism, and all other systems that too easily crucify the devalued, whether socially, economically, politically, or in other ways. We need not view the cross through the lens of substitutionary atonement, but can instead understand it as an opportunity to reject

dehumanization and take up love of God, neighbor, self, and enemy, even when doing so is profoundly difficult and risky.

Today, as we celebrate Kelly Kahlstrom's ordination, we are reminded of the work that belongs to all of us, which is to speak and act and sing and dance a new world into being, a world without crosses and crucifixions. We do this choice by choice, day by day, lifetime by lifetime. And as we do this work, the still-speaking God speaks through our lives, through our actions, through our wonderment and our justice efforts and our kindness and our humility. The still-singing God offers up an aria of awe and a country song of compassion. And the still-dancing God cuts a fabulous jitterbug of joy and holds us tenderly in a waltz of abundant love.

The Scripture tells us that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness does not overcome it. Today, we can reimagine that language in different, but equally hopeful ways.

The joy permeates our terror, despair, and rage, and none of these have overcome our joy.

The word speaks in the silence and the silence has not overcome it.

The dance continues through all that is hardest within our lives, among our communities, and across our nations, and none of the difficulties we face can stop the dance. Ever.

For now, as in days of old, it is the beginning. Today is the beginning. The dance continues. Language remains. Joy blesses us. Relationship in its horizontal and vertical forms sustains us and drives us forward to birth and build the world Jesus imagined, a world in which all people can flourish. May it be so. Amen.