

25 June 2005  
Ordination of Anthony Iovine

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church  
Yonkers, NY

## Jesu Juva

“For the Sake of the Gospel”

Text: 2 Timothy 1:1-3

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Anthony, the Word of God from Second Timothy you selected to be read this day will be the basis of my sermon: ***You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus.***

Four years ago I stood in this pulpit and we sent Anthony off to the seminary. At that time, in that sermon, I told Anthony he was unworthy to be a pastor in the Church of our Saviour Jesus Christ. His hands unworthy to baptize and to place the body and blood of our Saviour into spiritually hungry mouths. His tongue unworthy to preach God’s holy Word and to pronounce absolution to repentant, guilt-ridden sinners. His feet unworthy to take him into the hearts and homes of God’s people. And four years later I am here to say: *nothing has changed!* Oh, he was certified by the seminary, did well in his studies and classes, passed his vicarage and his theological interview – good stuff like that. But no degree on the wall, no amount of knowledge or training, no amount of experience – in short, *nothing he can do* is able to make him worthy of the Office into which he is being placed today. He is unworthy. So am I. And so are all his brothers gathered here today. The reason we are pastors is the same reason we are Lutherans and the same reason we are all Christians – it is by the grace of God, and His grace alone.

And so today is not really about Anthony. It dare not be. For if it were, it would be the height of arrogance for us to be here today, thinking that *we* could do this, and set aside a man for God and His work. We would be following in the footsteps of Korah and his rebellion, who thought they had the right to do what God had given Moses and Aaron to do. (Num 16) We would be like King Saul, who thought he had the right to offer sacrifices, because of who he was – because he was the King. (1 Sam 13) We would be following the likes of Simon the Magician, who thought himself somebody great, and thought that he could buy the gifts of God. (Acts 8) But no, today is not about us, as much as we in all of our sinful, navel-gazing, self-important, attention-grabbing, reality-TV glory would like it to be! No! Today is about our Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and what He in His grace is

doing – answering our prayers to send laborers into the harvest (Mt 9:38); giving the gift of another pastor and teacher to His Church (Eph 4:11); and especially, providing an undershepherd for His flock of saints at St. Matthew’s Lutheran Church of New Milford, NJ. It is His Church, His Bride, His office, His gifts, His water, His Word, His body and blood, His forgiveness, His holiness. But all this that is His, He desires to give to us, through His Son Jesus Christ, *that [we] may be His own, and live under Him in His kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness.* (Small Catechism, explanation to the Second Article) And so that these gifts may be given, He has instituted the Office of the Holy Ministry. (Augsburg Confession, Article V)

And today, Anthony, you are being placed into this Office and given your orders, *ordained*. And your orders are simple: to give these gifts of God to His people. You are not free to do and give and speak what you want, or what others may want. No, you are **to do** what God has given you to do, **to speak** what God has given you to speak, and **to give** what God has given you to give. His Office, His orders, His ministry. And with these orders, you are not called to be “successful”; you are called to be *faithful*. For the God whose gifts you give will produce the harvest, in His time and in His way. And He will, for He has promised that His Word will not return to Him empty, but will accomplish that for which He sends it. (Is 55:11) And He is sending that Word now through you, as He sends you to follow in the footsteps of Peter to tend His sheep and feed His lambs (Jn 21:15-19).

Now to some, that sounds easy – but you know that it is not. Like Paul and Timothy, and all the apostles and prophets, pastors and teachers who have gone before you, as we heard – you will *suffer* for doing this very thing. First of all, because where the sheep are, there the wolf is also. And if it is the desire of the wolf to attack and scatter the sheep, know that it is even more his task and delight to attack you. If Satan attacked the Good Shepherd, he will attack the undershepherd as well. . . . And then second, there will be those who reject and oppose you and the message that you bring. You will face the temptation to domesticate the Gospel and make it palatable to the world. But remember too, if there’s no reason to oppose your message, then there’s also no reason to believe it. And so it will sometimes take great courage to speak the Word of God faithfully – to challenge the sin and misbelief and idolatry that lives in all of our hearts. It will bring you hardship and heartache as you worry about God’s people, as well as those outside the Church. . . . And then third, your own flesh will also attack you also, pointing out your unworthiness, making you doubt, and causing despair. . . . And all this because this Office you are now entering is not simply a job – it is not simply what you do, and then not do when you go home. It is who you are. It will consume you. Pastors become what they preach and they preach what they believe. It is burden you will never escape. But what Luther said is true: Prayer, meditation, *and tribulation* will make you a theologian, and a pastor.

And for this you will be thought crazy. I said that four years ago also, and Anthony told me

a few weeks ago that's what he remembered most from that sermon. Because it was true then, wasn't it? Those who knew you *knew* that you were crazy, but still they couldn't figure out why you would do this! Many jobs are easier and require less time, most other careers are more financially rewarding, and many professions bring more prestige and respect. To be a pastor is not to climb up the ladder, but like Christ, to climb down. Down to the sick and lowly, to the outcast and sinner, to those others don't want to be bothered with. And to the world, that just doesn't make sense.

But I know to you – to you, it makes perfect sense! Because you know what life is like at the bottom of the ladder. You know the struggle with sin, and the doubts – especially after the death of your mother. You know what it's like to be lost and in despair, with little hope. And so you know also the joy of the Gospel. The joy of knowing that Christ did not demand you to climb up to Him, but who came down to you. The joy of hearing that the Son of God loves you and values you so highly that He came down to trade His life for yours; to die for your sins on the cross. The joy of hearing those words of forgiveness and freedom, that Jesus does not condemn you for your past, but has promised you a future of grace and hope. The joy of hearing those words that call you a dearly loved Son of God, a prodigal welcomed home with overwhelming love. And the joy to know that though your earthly mother was taken from you in your youth, you have the Church as your spiritual mother, to continue the work God began in your heart (just like Timothy!) through your Mom. . . .

And that joy, and the faith that Christ has given you through His Spirit has made such a difference in your life, that you now cannot see yourself doing anything else but this! Preaching and giving this same joy and faith. And for this day God has been preparing you – not just the last four years, but your whole life. Everything that has happened in your life has not been by accident, but for a purpose. For this day. That the Lord of the Church might use you to build His church. That in His stead and by His command, you would preach His Word – His strong Word – that is strong and powerful enough to change the lives and save even the worst of sinners. Even people like you and all of us gathered here this day.

And so today, this Word and message is entrusted to you – this Gospel that is for all! – as you are ordained into this Office, given your orders, and sent to New Milford, NJ. And knowing that you are unworthy is good, for it will help you remember that all that will be accomplished through you is not your doing – not your magnetic personality, or your magnificent ability, or your winsome and charismatic speech! It is the Word. All the Word. And when it is all the Word, then you can be sure, and your people can be confident – that the work you do is His, and whatever “success” may come your way is from Him. And so you go with that confidence and joy – that hidden under the shame and suffering of the cross is the splendor of God's glory to justify the ungodly, the give righteousness to the

unrighteous, to pronounce worthy the unworthy, and to bring life where there was only death. Only a resurrected Christ can do that, as He accomplishes the extraordinary through the ordinary. The hands and feet and mouth will be yours, but the Word and Spirit and work His.

What a privilege, to give this joy. What a privilege, to proclaim this Good News that is for all people. What a privilege, to be considered worthy to suffer for the Name of your Lord Jesus Christ. (Acts 5:41) You are not a different person today, and no different tomorrow. But the Office you are now entering will mean much for your life, from this day forward. And so in just a few moments now, you will have a yoke put upon you, a stole wrapped around your neck, the mantel of the Office. But it is not a yoke of the Law, but of the Gospel. Of the confidence that you are now sent with, that you go not alone, but in the Name, in the stead, and by the command, of your Lord Jesus Christ.

And so our prayers ascend to the throne of God this day for you, that the Spirit which is already yours in Baptism may make you bold to do these things – to (as we heard) ***endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory.*** (2 Tim 2:10) And know that this day we pray not alone, but with Jesus who prayed to His Father for His disciples and who still prays for you, His pastor. God's richest blessings to you, Pastor Iovine – first my son in the faith, then my friend, and now my brother in Office.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.