

CHARGE FROM THE CONGREGATION

The Service of Ordination to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament for Stephen Louis Clark

July 14, 2019

The Reverend Stephen Louis Clark, newly ordained, was invited to stand before the congregation; a long standing ovation ensued. Two youth fellowship members, Adam D'Antico and Nicholas Cobb, were invited to help him don his new clerical robe, a gift from the congregation of Greenwood Community Church; he was also given a "love offering" of \$3,500 ... funds received to date above and beyond the cost of the robe and stole (the latter presented later in this charge).

John the Baptist appeared in the Judean wilderness proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." As people responded, confessing their sins, he baptized them in the Jordan River. You know the story. One day a man came forward who had no sin to confess. John's baptism was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins; this man had committed no sin (*the only Person in human history, by the way, Who had this qualification*). So John protests, "I need to be baptized by you, [why] do you come to me?" Jesus responds, "Let it be so for now; for it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." There is much that could be said about this somewhat cryptic reply, but to keep this service from going into the dinner hour, I'll just point out Jesus is not coming to have His past forgiven; rather, He is stepping up to publicly embrace His future, His *calling*. This is akin to an ordination ceremony, as Jesus is about to commence His public ministry.

In the Gospels, the audible voice of God is heard only three times. Two of those occasions God speaks from heaven and affirms, "**THIS IS MY SON.**" It's as if God were saying on these two occasions, "Now hear this. This is so important, if you get nothing else straight, get this straight from MY mouth: **THIS IS MY SON.**" The first occasion is here at Jesus' baptism, His public ordination: "This is My beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased." The other time is at the Mount of Transfiguration. God speaks from heaven to Peter, James and John: "This is my beloved Son, Listen to Him!" By the way, that pretty much sums up all the Gospel imperatives: "**Be in Christ,**" and "**Listen to Him!**" In a nutshell, the Gospel message is twofold: (1) Be in relation to Jesus Christ, make certain you are "in Him" and He is "in you;" and (2) listen to Him; do as He says

I would like to look at this statement "THIS IS MY SON" from four unique vantage points as I/we present Steve the four liturgical stoles displayed before you.

FIRST, God said, "This is My beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased." The RED color of this liturgical stole (*presented by youth fellowship member Amelia Lombard*) is the color of fire, and the symbol of the Dove embroidered upon it recalls the Holy Spirit appearing in the form of the heavenly Dove descending at Jesus' ordination. Hence we use this liturgical color at services of ordination, as we call to mind the anointing of the Holy Spirit upon the One Whom God identified as His beloved Son; we also use this color at Pentecost as we recall the Holy Spirit descending as tongues of fire. (*Some, especially the Lutherans, also use this color on Reformation Sunday, commemorating that historic movement of the Spirit.*)

Evelyn Underhill once compared the Christian's obedience to Jesus to that of the sheepdog to a shepherd. **FIRST**, the sheepdog has learned to discern, listen and respond to the shepherd's voice. **SECOND**, the sheepdog always does what is commanded. **IMMEDIATELY**. **THIRD**, and just as important as the other two, the sheepdog always performs its duties with a wagging tail. The language and imagery of shepherding is often used about the pastorate (*the pastor is the shepherd of the flock, the flock is the congregation*), which has biblical precedent, but that language can be a bit misleading. For the LORD is our shepherd; we clergy are not. A lesson I learned early in ministry is that the pastor is not the Good Shepherd, and we do the congregation a great disservice if we try and assume that role which **ONLY** belongs to the Son in Whom God is well pleased. We are called to be sheepDOGS ... the trained and pedigreed sheepdogs, yes ... but just the sheepdogs who first and foremost learn to listen and respond to the Shepherd's voice and then run around and yap and bark and cajole (*and maybe sometimes nip and growl*) to try and encourage the sheep TO FOLLOW THE SHEPHERD, TO BE "IN CHRIST," THE SON IN WHOM GOD IS WELL PLEASSED. Jesus is the Shepherd, we are not. And the proper liturgical response for that is "Thanks be to God!" That's humbling, but it is also free-ing, for nothing will burn us out quite like trying to take on the job of Jesus and assuming the role of Savior in people's lives. When we promote ourselves to Shepherd, we are promoting ourselves into incompetence. We are not the Light. We bear witness to the Light. It's the Shepherd's church, it is not "our" church. In fact, as Presbyterians who emphasize the role of the priesthood of believers, all of us "sheep" are also called to be "sheepdogs" who are trying to please the Shepherd, listen to the Shepherd's voice, do what He commands and to do so with a wagging tail (not a growl), until that day we see our Shepherd face to face and He says to us, "Well done, good and faithful ... doggy."

SECOND, the congregation of Greenwood Community Church today proudly says, "THIS IS OUR SON." The liturgical color of this next stole is Green (*presented by youth fellowship member Carissa Koop*). Green, the color of growth, is the color that adorns the church most of the year; it is used in the "regular" seasons of life, the non-holidays, what some traditions call "Ordinary Time", the Sundays after Pentecost. This particular stole is also a gift from the congregation (*the other three stoles were funded by other sources*). Green seemed an appropriate gift from this congregation which has known, loved and supported Steve through all the "regular seasons" of life over two decades, and we are honored and privileged to host the worship service for this significant milestone of his ministry and calling. We are deeply grateful to the ECO: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians **and** to the Presbyterian Church (USA) for graciously accommodating us and blessing Steve and us by coming here to our house of worship today. It is a unique,

inspiring and meaningful opportunity for this congregation to witness "one of our own" raised in our church family from toddlerhood being ordained for the Ministry of Word and Sacrament; also, it is an historically rare opportunity, as this is a first in our congregation's seventy-five year history. Throughout his life (*we came here when he was four*), Steve has always been actively involved in this church and has done so by choice, never by my coercion. Always in worship, active in the youth fellowships, the Sunday School, our Vacation Bible School (*eight years as a child participant and six as the VBS activities leader*), an occasional assistant worship leader, and he even supplied our pulpit a few times before he came on staff. Nine years ago he became the youngest person in our congregation's (then) sixty-six year history to be elected and ordained to the ministry office of Deacon, and he served admirably on our staff as Ministry Intern these past three years. This church family beams with pride as we say to all our honored guests, and especially those who traveled from Corinth: "**THIS IS OUR SON**, in whom we are well pleased ... Listen to him!"

THIRD, "THIS IS MY BELOVED SON." I've been SO looking forward to this unique privilege of being able to directly quote our Heavenly Father at the ordination of His only begotten Son! This stole is from me; it is the liturgical color of violet, or purple (*presented by youth fellowship member Rachel Porcaro*), which adorns the church during the holy seasons of preparation and expectation, Lent and Advent. Steve, it has been my life's honor to raise you and your sisters ... and to do whatever I could to help throughout your lives, however imperfectly I may have done so ... in the seasons of preparation and expectation called childhood and young adulthood. I have so enjoyed seeing you grow up to become a sincerely faithful, thoroughly dependable, winsomely gracious, scrupulously principled, creatively resourceful, innately self-motivated and highly intelligent young man who relates well to people of all ages and who steadily exhibits a winsome, thoughtful and unshakeable faith in your Lord and Savior. As many of you know, in college Steve twice won school-wide annual election to the post of Student Government Association Chaplain at Cedarville University (*a salaried position that also helped pay the tuition!*). Among other duties, he preached eighteen times a year at Cedarville's well-attended daily chapel (*average attendance @ 3,000*). I attended three times in person, and watched others online; I clearly remember being both proud and humbled as I watched Steve mature and develop into a passionately gifted speaker and engaging preacher who captivated his large audiences, had an obvious and clear call to ministry, and who was miles (*if not light years!*) beyond where his father was at his age. I also don't mind telling you that when he would fill the pulpit here in my absence, the following week not a few people would encourage me to take more vacations. You all know I never remarried ... let's just say my dear wife was a tough act to follow ... and Steve and his two sisters endured being raised by their father. From an early age, Steve consistently displayed an innately tenacious spirit, good humor and an impeccably solid character that greatly contributed to the stability and happiness of our otherwise bereaved home; he has always been a well-behaved, ungrudgingly obedient and eager-to-please son, as well as a wonderfully gracious and gently loving brother to his sisters, and he grew into a young man and even a friend with whom I have shared several adventures ... and misadventures.

FOURTH AND FINALLY, THE WHITE STOLE. (*Presented by youth fellowship member Mandy-Lynn Phillips*). White is the liturgical color we use when we celebrate the holidays which commemorate the divinity of Jesus ... e.g., Christmas, the Sundays after Christmas, Trinity Sunday, the Sundays of Easter. **White** is the color of heaven; it represents our Resurrection hope. During this service of ordination I am half expecting a voice to again resonate from heaven ... only this time, it will be a FEMININE voice ... proudly saying, "**THIS IS MY SON.**" Steve, consider this stole as being from your mother, now in heaven, and the one who may have helped determine your destiny by desiring to name you after her two favorite pastors (*actually, he was named primarily after the biblical Stephen, but also after me ... the middle name, Louis, was after the Rev. Dr. Louis H. Evans, Jr, former pastor of National Presbyterian Church in Washington, DC who was hugely influential in my wife's coming to faith; he was the pastor who married us and he also came cross country from California to officiate Ann's funeral here at Greenwood in 1999*).

On **April 13, 1994**, after you were delivered from your mother's womb, the nurse handed you to me; I took you in my arms as she said "This is your son." Five months later, **September 4, 1994**, your mother handed you to me; I took you in my arms and baptized you at the First Presbyterian Church of Berwick, PA. On **May 11, 2008**, I confirmed you in the faith as you kneeled, right there where you now stand ... that day was also Mother's Day, which was always a complicated celebration for us. But I'm sure Mom was looking on from heaven as you publicly confirmed the faith into which you were baptized. **February 24, 2019**, the day the Corinthian church called you as pastor, I half expected to hear reports from Corinth of a heavenly feminine voice saying "**THIS IS MY SON**" as that day was our 29th wedding anniversary. I half expected a similar report on **May 18, 2019** from Endicott, NY when you were officially welcomed into the Cornerstone Presbytery ... which was the twentieth anniversary of her passing. Coincidences? Nah ...no Presbyterian worth his/her salt believes in coincidences. Your mother always had a knack for organization; I wouldn't be at all surprised if she had something to do with coordinating some of these dates! Now, to be sure, I don't believe those in heaven are watching our every single moment; God alone is omniscient and sees all. But I do believe God at times directs attention to certain special events for some select saints. I can just see Him saying, "*Hey, Ann! Come on over here, look, you're going to want to see this! THIS IS YOUR SON! Hey Charlie, Elaine, Alan ... Look! THIS IS YOUR GRANDSON. Look how well he turned out! See what a good man and a faithful servant he turned out to be! See how happy he has made everyone today!*"

And Steve, these unseen witnesses are cheering for you and encouraging you on, along with all of us gathered here this afternoon, as you go forward into this call, and into this wonderful life adventure of pastoral ministry ... because **YOU ARE OUR SON**. Amen.