

Send Me!

by Rev. Durrell Watkins, M.A., M.Div.
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Sunshine Cathedral
Isaiah 6.1-8; Luke 19.1-10

We're ordaining Michael Diaz today...who'd have thought we'd ever see this day? God knows I didn't.

Robert and I found Michael, like a bad penny, and he's been in our lives ever since. Michael was fresh out of Oral Roberts University...he got out early for good behavior, and he came to the Episcopal Divinity School. That's the school where I'm doing my doctorate and where Robert earned his Master's degree.

And there was this kid...I mean, most people go to seminary in mid-life anymore, so at 22 he really did seem like a kid.

He lived in the same building where Robert and I lived. Robert and I had two apartments before we came to Florida , one in Cambridge and one in Manhattan . I spent more time in Manhattan and he spent more time in Cambridge , but we got to enjoy both cities that way.

Well, for two years our Cambridge apartment was in the same building where Michael lived. And though he lived two floors above us, he seemed to think our kitchen was his...especially when we would cook the Southern favorites that have rendered Robert and me so corpulent.

And then Robert and I moved to Florida , and Michael moved into OUR apartment, downstairs. He didn't have to hire movers to transport his furniture down stairs...he just trained the mice in his apartment to schlep everything down.

Now don't get me wrong...our building didn't have mice...just his apartment. He had some sort of scientific experiment going on up there...he had a theory that if he never took out the garbage, it would evolve, and crawl out of his apartment on its own.

Well, a year after we moved to Florida , Michael moved to Florida to do his internship here at Sunshine Cathedral. We only pay interns half-time, so we said, "Why don't you stay with us for that year - not a day longer - and that way you can acclimate to the new environment with people you know."

And our guest room became his room for almost a year.

We have marble floors...marble tile all throughout our condo. One day I went into Michael's room and it was amazing...I said, "Robert! When did Michael carpet his bedroom?" Turns out it wasn't carpet...a fungus had grown all over the floor.

He hasn't always been sure of his skills and gifts. At the beginning of his internship he'd sometimes tell me, "I'm still trying to find myself." I'd say, "Where were you last, let's look there. Maybe that's where you are."

Finally, Tod moved down from New England and the boys got their own place...just a few blocks away from us...though they've never once invited us over. The day they moved into their new apartment, I turned to Robert and I said, "Well...Michael's gone. Where will you go for aggravation?"

The truth is, we gave Michael a chance, and he took that chance and proved himself here at Sunshine Cathedral beyond our expectations. He has demonstrated pastoral care skills that may exceed anyone else's on staff.

He's proven himself to be a good teacher in religious education settings. And though our least experienced preacher, he all the same has worked diligently to prepare every sermon he's offered and has delivered quality every time.

Of course, we all have weaknesses. Administration was his area that needed the most improvement. And in less than a year, he has demonstrated measurable, significant improvement in that area.

There is also a quality that is hard to measure, hard to name, but I think we've all experienced it in Michael. He is out-going, charming, kind, and has invited people into the life of this community with energy and sincerity and a genuine graciousness that can't be taught.

There are many influences in Michael's life, I'm sure. His seminary education serves him well. The love and nurture he has always received from his mother and grandparents undoubtedly shaped his good character.

The support and loyal companionship he receives from Tod is undoubtedly a blessing to him. The life and energy of this church has certainly become part of him.

His openness to the Spirit is evident in his life, and his sincere desire to be the best person possible is a very big part of who he is and how he continues to develop.

I've seen Michael grow into his ministry role, and I honestly believe that Sunshine Cathedral is better for the gifts that Michael Diaz has brought to us.

We are fortunate that he is joining our staff full-time to coordinate our volunteers and our Miami outreach. He's already off to a good start with those efforts.

We should all celebrate that Michael's response to the call to ministry was, "Here I am; send me."

We need ministers who will declare truly hopeful, joyous and good news, consistently, repeatedly, unashamedly, courageously, articulately, enthusiastically, persuasively.

We are ordaining such a minister today.

Now, I've roasted him. I've praised him. Finally, I want to place what is happening today in the sacred context of our scriptures.

Today we heard the story of Zacchaeus. Only Luke mentions Zacchaeus, and he does so, as he does throughout the gospel, to demonstrate that God doesn't have one person to waste; God's love is so much bigger than we've been led to believe.

Zacchaeus is a sort of supervisor of tax collectors. Roman taxes were onerous and people resented an empire coming in, occupying their land, and then charging them for their own oppression! "You conquer us, occupy us, and then tax us to support your conquering aims?!" Tax collectors were hated; in fact, Jesus' community had a name for them... "sinners." And Zacchaeus was chief of these sinners. He was considered a traitor to his own community and so he was hated, rejected, condemned, accused, vilified, mistrusted, considered utterly loathsome.

Zacchaeus was viewed as unacceptable, wicked...to everyone in Jesus' community, except Jesus. Jesus doesn't buy into the judgments of others, but knows that every person has sacred value and that every person is loved by God.

So when Jesus sees Zacchaeus, he calls out to him. Jesus calls Zacchaeus (of all people), and invites himself into Zacchaeus' life. Jesus initiates the action, and comes not to the self-righteous, but to one whom the self-righteous enthusiastically condemned.

And once Zacchaeus is touched by the grace and the love and compassion that Jesus offers, his life is changed.

The story doesn't say that people stopped condemning him.
The story doesn't say that he gave up his profession that others found so detestable.
The story doesn't say he stopped being who he was; but it does show us that he was so much more than religious people were able to see.

The story just says that Jesus noticed him, saw him as the child of God that he was, and Zacchaeus responded, and showed the truth of his character by saying, "I'll share generously with the poor, and make amends to anyone I've ever cheated."
And Jesus affirms him.

You see, Zacchaeus was lost. Not because of who he was, or what he was. He just felt cut off from his community...unwelcome, unloved, unwanted.
But Jesus says, "I've come to embrace those who feel cut off or left out.
I've come to help people who feel wounded or lost; I've come to help them feel whole again.
I've come to affirm your sacred value, even though others dared to use God's name in vain to deny your sacred value."

Michael, I'm here today as a prophet of God to affirm your sacred value; I'm here today to bear witness to your calling into a life of godly service.
And I'm here today to declare that you are anointed by the spirit of God to serve God by reaching out to those in the margins who feel lost, cut off, separated from their own dignity and from God's love.

You are being commissioned today to spend the rest of your life telling people that they have sacred value and that they are loved by God without conditions and without limits.

It is a difficult calling.
It is sometimes a scary calling.
It is also a noble calling.
And I thank God that you have received that calling and responded by saying, "here I am. Send me."
May God bless your ministry and may God bless the people to whom you minister. Amen.

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