

Awe-Ful Love

On the Ordination of Margaret Aymer

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Romans 8:31-39

It is important to me to make several acknowledgements before I begin. First, to acknowledge my thankfulness to Margaret and the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta for asking me to participate in her ordination, and to Central Presbyterian Church for inviting me to preach in the midst of this wonderful community and worship space. But then, having said this, I must also acknowledge how unbelievably intimidating it is to participate in such an ordination by deigning to preach among such a scholarly group in one of Atlanta's most historic and influential churches. On top of that, Margaret made sure that I knew that there would likely be noise during my speaking... an unsettling experience for a "frozen chosen" Presbyterian. And, as if all of that were not enough, she made it clear that Romans 8 was the text. Now how can anyone be pretentious enough to dare speak after hearing perhaps the most eloquent assertion of Christianity to ever be written?

"I am certain of this: neither death, nor life, no angel, no prince, nothing that exists, nothing still to come, not any power, or height or depth, nor any created thing can ever come between us and the love of God made visible in Christ Jesus our Lord."
(Romans 8:38-30, Jerusalem Bible)

"Single Couples." That's what we called them. It was 1970 and Sigrid and I took our young family, including our four-month-old daughter Inge to Columbia Seminary. [By the way, Margaret never fails to remind me, that's the "other" seminary, the one outside of Atlanta in that small town nearby called Decatur.] There we were, a young couple with child. And we coined the term "single couple" on a Friday night, just after another couple, new friends, had called at the last minute to invite us to go out to a movie with them. Didn't they know we couldn't just run out willy nilly, that a last minute babysitter was near impossible to find on a Friday night? We were disappointed, and a little angry. "Single couples!" They don't understand what it's like to be a parent. WE were parents, and our newfound perspective on life forever differentiated us from all those other *childless* people. Our vision of life was different, even superior! My arrogance seemed to know no bounds.

I was finally confronted a few months later, when I was struggling with a sermon illustration in Don Wardlaw's Introduction to Preaching Class. Y'all probably recognize the name "Wardlaw", as Don is a cousin of some guy named Ted who used to be around these parts, I'm told. Well in this class I was going to use a hard night at home as this sermon illustration – a night when I had struggled for sleep while Inge, our daughter, screamed her way through yet another painful ear infection. It was the night before an important Greek exam and I was sleepless and angry. I struggled for the words, "I wanted..." "I wanted..." I couldn't say it.

"To kill her," Don asked?

“Yes,” my voice was trembling on the verge of tears, “to kill her.”

“Every parent feels that,” said Don, “and that is why it’s such a powerful thing to say. Just because you feel it doesn’t mean you will do it.”

“But I can’t say that in a sermon!” I almost screamed.

“Why not?” asked Don. “People will understand. God understands.”

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A scant six years later parenthood got me again. Lara, our second child, was born two and a half months premature. We were unlucky. Had she been born twenty-five years earlier she would have likely died. Twenty-five years later and medical technology would perhaps have been able to prevent the two cerebral hemorrhages that now left her multiply, severely, and permanently disabled. But there she was, my daughter, terribly injured in her fight to survive.

This time the conversation wasn’t with a seminary professor. No. This time I went right to the top. “God,” I prayed, “it’s really a good thing you’re a spirit, because if I could get my hands on you...” “I hesitated. God and I had had lots of heated conversations in my short life, but I had never felt this feeling. “...I would kill you!” I choked through stinging tears.

This time there was no caring seminary professor to catch me, to revive me, to bring me back to my humanity. I would have to wait on grace – but it came. It came in the crooked smile of a severely disabled little girl who taught me how much God loves me. Who taught me how to love myself again.

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You would think that I would learn. By middle age I had been talking to God for a long time. “God,” I would whine, “if you love me enough to give your son, why can’t you love me enough to take this damned gender thing away?”

I had spent the better part of four decades wrestling secretly with this unreasonable and incorrigible desire to be female. It was the stuff of many of my conversations with God, some filled with anger, some with supplication, all heartfelt. I had wanted to “get away with it” – to be able to live through all of my life to the very end with my secret safely intact. Now, in middle age, the inevitable depression threatened to overtake me. It had already brought an end to my marriage and threatened to bring an early end to my life.

By this point in my life my homicidal anger had long disappeared, perhaps wrapped into the self-hatred of my depression. This time the messenger of grace was not a seminary professor or my little daughter, now grown. This time the message came from a back-slid Roman Catholic from Warsaw Poland, a psychologist named Margaret. She was my fourth therapist in over twenty years of continuous therapy. “For a minister you

have little faith!” she reflected. “And you’re not confused about your gender, you’re just afraid that no one will understand,” she spoke like an Old Testament prophet.

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You see, these are beautiful, even awesome, words spoken to us through Paul. The problem with them is not the beauty of their truth, but the difficulty we have in hearing them. Awe-ful love is what I like to call it. I like the mixed textures and meanings the word expresses, the Thirteenth Century marriage of *awe* and *fullness*. To be filled with awe. But I also like the darkness of it, the way that it appeals to my struggle to understand God’s incredible love in the sticky messy reality that is my life.

Why do we not just GET IT! Why do we so struggle to understand? Paul knew well how hard it is to fathom this kind of awful love. In this, perhaps his most fully developed thinking, he draws clear lines for us, showing our very human need to somehow deserve the love we receive, what Paul calls the Law, and the simple truth of our being loved in God’s marvelous way through Jesus, who is the Christ. Being truly loved without deserving is both precious and difficult at the same time, awe-ful. But we feel insecure in such love, needing somehow to be in control of it, to earn it. And so we struggle even in the full knowledge of God’s precious gift of Jesus.

And that is why we need each other. None of us can claim full knowledge of such awe-ful love, even though the scripture lays it out clearly. The assertion of Romans 8:38 & 39 is without qualification. Nothing, nothing in all of God’s creation can separate us from this love. And to understand this we must all come to the throne of grace with our individual struggles, to fathom this love in the context of our own experience whether it be the experience of disease or disability or race or gender or poverty or even, my favorite, faithlessness. We can hear the words of love in scripture, we can remember the expression of love in the sacraments, but we cannot experience the love without the full embrace of every member of Christ’s body.

I want to stop talking for a minute, and just ask you to look around. Go ahead, turn your head and scan the crowd God has gathered to celebrate this moment in the church’s life when we set Margaret Aymer apart for her special service. Some of the differences between us are visible. You can see race, and gender, and age, poverty and wealth, and some of our disability. What you cannot see represents perhaps even more profound differences. Experience, language, pain, fear, joy, peace, ignorance, love, disease, hidden disability, and doubt. All of these things, and much more, are here with us today in this place, and we bring them with us as we approach this celebration of love. As one stumbles, others lift and help, all moving toward the One who created us the One who loves us completely.

How can the church say that there are some of us whose experience of God’s love is unacceptable, whose voices must be muffled, whose lives cut off? How can we rend a church asunder when we so desperately need every life, every community in our quest to fathom God’s awe-ful love? How can we show to a world struggling with hate and fear what this love is if we cannot tolerate it in our own house?

And so this gathering is, in a most colorful way, an expression of the very ministry we celebrate.

Our church is under assault. Make no mistake. There are those in our fellowship who would make ours an exclusive and safe place, where those who seem to be outside the pale of acceptable Christian fellowship are relegated to other, more “tolerant” denominations. Ordination, they say, is only for those whose lives are exemplary, whose experience extraordinary.

The fact is, however, that the Presbyterian Church does not really, in the strict sense, ordain people. We don’t select people of commendable faith to hold up in ordination as if they were somehow superior in life or ministry. We ordain people to particular work, not the people themselves.

So who are the ministers of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)? Look around you, as the room is filled with us, and I am not selecting those who have been ordained. If you are a baptized member of the PCUSA you have been claimed as a minister in this church. Every one of us.

How many people here remember being baptized? Perhaps the only real problem with infant baptism is the fact that we cannot carry the memory of that moment with us in our lives and ministries. For it was the moment you were grafted into the body of Christ, proclaimed fit for service as a minister in Christ’s church. Let me make this clear, there is no other essential qualification for ministry! We are all God’s ministers, and your ministry began the moment that hand, dipped in water, rested on your head and claimed you for the Church.

In a few minutes you will witness a similar event, as hands come to rest on the head of one Margaret Aymer. The resemblance to baptism is not accidental, and in this moment, as in baptism, the ministry of each one of us is proclaimed and renewed. As wonderful a person as Margaret is, and she IS a wonderful person as many will attest, this is not the reason she is being ordained today. There are many wonderful people in this room who are not ordained. Margaret is being ordained, set apart from us as a teacher, as one who will train others who will in turn also be set apart to equip the churches real ministers. In effect Margaret and those seminarians she will teach are set apart to help us in our ministries, wherever they may be. Nursing, sales, teaching middle school, counseling, hairdressing, human resources, driving a truck... these are ministries for which we are supported. And it is Margaret any many others like her who will help us.

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Perhaps the greatest issue that separates us in this and many other denominations is not sexuality. It is scripture, and how scripture comes to have authority in our lives as Jesus’ followers. Some wish to say that scripture is authoritative in and of itself, somehow mysteriously having the power to reveal this love of God to us. This is, perhaps, the way of tradition.

There are, however, new voices among us, Margaret’s among them, who are helping us to understand that scriptural authority does not live exclusively inside this

verbal container. Rather, the authority of scripture rises from our own human experience as we encounter the history, poetry, and power of the Old and New Testaments.

I recently had the great pleasure of being a guest lecturer in one of Margaret's classes. I was amazed to discover that, in her teaching scripture to seminarians she doesn't just point them at textbooks and libraries, but sends them to the taverns and street corners. She asks them to bring the daily "stuff" of their lives to their intense study of the New Testament, there to discover anew the life-giving words of love.

We are here to celebrate God's love shared with us in the life and ministry of Margaret Aymer, and to set her apart from us for the particular service for which she has been called and prepared. [And, by the way Margaret, that includes finishing that dissertation!] May we, in her life and work, come to experience the awesome love of God within the fullness of our very human experience. God's Awe-ful Love.