

This past week I was at a conference called Authorizing Ministry for the 21st Century.

It was about how our denomination is revising our Manual on Ministry.

What's the Manual on Ministry you say?

Well, I am glad you asked.

It is a big, bureaucratic book that outlines how people get ordained in our denomination, or how they get the ability to serve a UCC church if they were ordained in another denomination.

It also deals with ethical issues for clergy, it has the Marks for Authorized Ministry which articulates what clergy should be proficient at doing.

It's kind of like the professional handbook for pastors within the United Church of Christ.

But there's one section that has what's called the Theology of Ministry, which I found fascinating.

I want to read a little bit of it to you, because it pertains to you all, the ministers of the church.

It reads, *"The United Church of Christ believes that God calls every Christian to be a servant of God, a minister, living and serving in Christ's name."*

This call is celebrated sacramentally in baptism as persons are claimed for Christ by the Holy Spirit and the Church;

all who are baptized spend the rest of their lives responding to God's call and claim.

The particulars of each person's call and ministry vary with time, place, talents, experience, personal situation and responsibilities, and, importantly, the needs of the world.

Ministry is lived in every aspect of one's life as God's love is shown in word and deed." (Manual on Ministry, 2016 draft, pg. 11).

So while the Manual on Ministry is mostly about clergy, it clearly states that you all, the baptized Christians who make up the church, are called to be the ministers of the church, living and serving in Christ's name.

I say this because sometimes we get caught up with roles and titles and prestige.

We clergy have the tendency to feel extra important with our seminary education and our Reverend before our names.

But let me tell you, the passage we heard this morning, is one of the most humbling of all those in the Bible, and it reminds us, just as the Manual on Ministry does, that we are ALL called.

It is Mary's magnificat, which means *magnifies* in Latin.

It's literally her song of praise, where she magnifies God.

Now, the message that she conveys is humbling.

She says, “[God] has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.” (Luke 1: 51-53).

So, yea, if there are any clergy feeling proud of themselves for being ordained or set apart or somehow holier than the rest of you all, Christ’s disciples, then they need to read Mary’s song a few times.

However, what’s even more powerful about this passage is the reason *why* she is saying it.

She is saying it because God chose her!

The story tells us that of all the people in the world to be the mother of the ultimate teacher who ever lived, God chose her.

And if we know anything about mothers and the influence they have on their children, Jesus couldn’t have had just any mom.

He needed one who was going to raise him up in the ways of extravagant love and rebellious courage against the Empire.

God needed a woman as committed to the cause as her son would be, so she could show him the way.

Well, guess what? Mary didn’t have any credentials.

She hadn’t gone to rabbinical school.

She wasn't a priest, and she didn't have a title before her name.

She was a young, unmarried, girl, who barely had an identity of her own.

This is who God calls, the most unlikely ones.

It reminds me that it takes all types to carry out the work of the church in our time and place.

We might not all be called to ordination, but we are all called to serve, the official Manual on Ministry says so.

Now, I want to tell you a story that I think illustrates what it means to be a bearer of God's love in this world.

It's about an artist and a beautiful painting.

Once upon a time a holy man travelled to Egypt.

He went to visit the king.

He was treated like royalty.

Touring the palace, the holy man was taken to a room with the most incredible paintings he had ever seen.

These, he was told, were painted by an illustrious master hundreds of years before.

They were priceless.

The holy man noticed that one wall was conspicuously empty.

Three walls were covered with the lovely paintings, but one wall was bare.

He motioned to the last wall.

The king explained that the artist had died before he completed the paintings and no one dared to match his skill and expertise, so the fourth wall was never painted.

The holy man was silent for moment.

Then he told the king,

“I can create something for that wall that will surpass by far the other paintings.”

The king was incredulous.

“Allow me a few days, curtain off the area, and give me privacy. I need some things, rags, powdered silver, antimony.”

He went to work.

He mixed a paste of the silver and antimony.

He covered the wall with it and then worked hard rubbing it into the surface.

After it dried, it was polished.

And he called the king in to see it.

The king was stunned.

It was true.

The wall was beautiful.

It was a mirror that reflected the other paintings, and now they seemed to be alive and moving, vibrant and shimmering.

Now all the paintings looked truer, more beautiful than before.

[Advent, Christmas and Epiphany: Stories and Reflections on the Sunday Readings, Megan McKenna, p. 71-72, adapted]

See? The man didn't have to be a skilled artist to paint a beautiful wall.

He didn't have to worry about being as good as the original artist, he didn't have to go to a prestigious art school.

He simply saw the beauty that was already there and reflected it, so it multiplied.

Mary was not such a special person.

We don't know that she was extraordinary in any way.

She wasn't necessarily very talented or generous or smart.

But she was willing to reflect the love and goodness of God, to follow God's call in her life, to make God's hopes and dreams for the world come to life.

Now, we are all capable of doing this.

We all have the capacity to reflect love, the way the painter created the mirror.

But what stops us?

The same thing that stopped Mary, at first.

Fear.

Her cousin, Elizabeth tells her she is blessed, and she responds, *“And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?”* (Luke 1:43).

She moves from fear, to trust, and then offers her song of praise in which she is incredibly grateful for the gift she’s been given.

But she had to move past the fear to accept the great responsibility.

We have all been given a great responsibility, as those of us who have been baptized are called to spend the rest of our lives responding to God’s call and claim!

It says so in the Manual on Ministry.

And just as fear made Mary hesitate, so too it paralyzes us.

We face fear on many fronts.

Some of us are afraid at home, perhaps of domestic violence.

Or maybe we’re afraid of our neighborhood and our personal safety.

Or maybe it's economic fears, will we be able to stretch the money to the end of the month?

Will there be money for college and retirement?

Or even Christmas presents?

Will we have to choose between paying for food or needed medications?

There are fears of aging and dying, of loneliness, of feeling incapable because your body isn't what it was 20 years ago.

Then there's fear of failure, fear of bruising our ego, of not living up to expectations of others, fear of failing God.

There are so many reasons why that painter could have walked by the blank wall and never turned back.

There are times when it would be easier for us to give into the fear, to not reflect God's love and light in the world.

But what if Mary had done that?

What if she said, sorry Gabriel, try again in a few years... I am too young and too unmarried right now?

You see, Mary defied her fears and stood up and promised to reflect God's love and light in the way she raised her son, the chosen one.

She wasn't wealthy or notable or educated.

It doesn't matter whether you have a college degree or a good genetic lineage or a high IQ, you have been called to be a minister of the Gospel through all your actions.

God's will for our world is waiting to be manifested, it's up to each of us to answer the call, to stare down our fears and not to be blank walls, but to be mirrors that reflect God's compassion and grace, everywhere we go.

After all, it's not me telling you to do this, it's the official United Church of Christ Manual on Ministry that says,

"God calls every Christian to be a servant of God, a minister, living and serving in Christ's name... Ministry is lived in every aspect of one's life as God's love is shown in word and deed."

So go forth, and be mirrors that reflect the love, kindness, grace and compassion that is all around us.

Amen.