

Sermon notes from the Ninth Investiture of the Order of the Diocese of New Westminster
The Massey Theatre, New Westminster
November 3, 2018

“For where your treasure is, there shall your heart be also.”
Luke 12: 35

How many of you here today remember the little rhyme that you learned when you were a child, it goes, “This is the church and this is the steeple, open it up and see all the people!” Well look around today—see all the people, and even here where there is out to no steeple. But this is the church—whenever the people of God gather that’s the church. And as I look out this morning, I see three different groups of people. First there’s the Archbishop and her clergy and musicians. Second there are those about to be invested in the Order of the Diocese of New Westminster, those who are already Members of the Order, and their fellow parishioners. And third there are the family members and friends who aren’t part of any particular congregation but you’re here because your friend or your mother or father or aunt or uncle or grandparent is up here on the stage to be honoured by their church. It’s to you, this third group that I want to speak directly this morning.

You must wonder what the heck we’re doing here, or what you’re doing here! I want to tell you some things about the church and some of the words you’re going to hear as the citations are read in just a few minutes. You’ll hear the words “ministry and service” quite a few times. In the Christian household, the word ministry has a long history. It comes from about the 1st century when the church was a minority in the Roman Empire. The word *minister* was the opposite of the word *magister*. The magister, from which we get the word magistrate was someone who great in something, who dealt with big important things. But Christians were not about self-aggrandizement; they were concerned with little, but significant things. Things like caring for the poor, visiting the sick, taking care of children. While the magister would put on airs to indicate how important he or she was, the minister would humbly just go about their work, not caring at all if anyone noticed. You’ll also hear a lot of technical words like Warden—which doesn’t have to do with taking care of a jail; it’s a senior leadership role in a congregation. And you’ll hear some strange expressions like Messy Church and Godly Play and other such terms that may confuse you. If one of these terms is used to describe your relative, and you don’t know what it means, ask them.

You see they have been caught up in something that is very strange in today’s world—they have been engaged in the life of a community that is wider than family and bigger than neighborhood. It is not a secret society, it is open to anyone who wants to be part of it. It is far from a perfect group—in fact, most every time it meets everyone there admits that we are all miserable sinners. It reaches beyond itself to care for and about people in the world particularly those who society too often forgets—the sick, the elderly confined to their homes, young children, and people who live on the edges of life—the poor, the refugees, the homeless and those who live with mental illness.

So what is this community all about? Well this is the church, and these are the people—they've been engaged in at least one of three ways, and most of those who are honoured this morning have been engaged in all three ways¹.

First, they understand themselves as children of God. It's a core teaching of the church, that we are not just random life forms but are deeply connected with the divine. There is within each of us a spark of divinity. You will have heard that in the Psalm that we sang this morning, words from almost 3000 years ago that affirm our connection to the divine, "Where can I go from your presence, where can I flee from your Spirit?" (Psalm 139, verse 7) The church believes that God is always with us because the human being is created in the image of God and as we grow in this understanding we find ourselves drawn to love the things God loves, things like justice and fairness, beauty and honesty, compassion and care. We are not defined by what we own, or what others say about us, or even what we do, we are God's beloved daughters and sons, God's children who seek to give expression to this identity in the little things that really matter.

Second they understand that they are part of the People of God. If you ask them why they are part of the church they'll probably begin talking about community, about how important and wonderful it is to be part of a larger group than just their family or their neighbourhood. They'll speak with deep affection about others they have met through the church, and may even recount moments of deep spiritual connection with those with whom they worship week upon week. They'll tell you about fun times over meals, beautiful times of prayer with others and poignant even tearful times when someone they have known at the church has died and the community has gathered for a memorial service. They'll describe projects that they've done together and for many of those being invested in this Order today, they'll tell you about the organizational infrastructure of Councils and Wardens and finance and the myriad activities that help the church to function.

And third they'll speak about the Reign of God, about this deep conviction that Christians share that God is up to something in the world and we want to be part of it. Simply put, what God is up to is making the world a place of peace and justice rather than an arena for war and conflict. And so, in small but important ways church folks seek to make a difference. They may be involved with international projects like providing education for girls in Africa, or organizing meals for the homeless and poor, they may be involved in political protests about pipelines or working hard to promote justice for indigenous people in Canada. They seek to express their identity as God's children and as part of the People of God through practical acts, demonstrating their love of God not only with what they say but also with what they do.

Children of God, part of the people of God and working for the reign of God in the world: those honoured today have been leading lights within our church community. Now if truth be told, because of our faith tradition, many if not all of those who are becoming members of the Order of the Diocese of New Westminster today are religiously uncomfortable with this whole thing. They've just been doing what followers of Jesus do, taking their part in the life of the church, growing in their awareness of being

God's children, and doing what needs to be done for the healing of the planet. But we honour them today so that we can all remember what it is that we're called to. We're called to lives of service in the name of Christ. We're called to pass on the faith that we've received. We're called to know ourselves as beloved of God and to help each person we meet know that they too are beloved of God.

So as you wait to hear the citation read for the relative you're here for today, listen to what is said about each person. Think about your own life and you might just feel in your heart a stirring, a prompt to have a conversation, to learn why this work is so important to your friend, your aunt or uncle, your mother or father or your grandparent. Because for those of us who are involved in this kind of weird but wonderful body called the church, we find it to be the most important part of life. It draws us out of self-centredness into understanding ourselves as part of God's work in the world. That's a treasure, and as Jesus said, where your treasure is, there shall your heart be also.

Preached by the Very Reverend Peter G. Elliott
Dean of the Diocese of New Westminster.

¹ I am grateful to the Reverend Canon Harold Percy for the schema, *Child of God, People of God, Reign of God*. It was a privilege to contribute a chapter to a book celebrating Harold's ministry, you can read more here: *Good News Church: Celebrating the Legacy of Harold Percy*. Edited by John P. Bowen and Michael P. Knowles, Burlington: Castle Quay Books, 2018. *All Doors Open: God's Children, People and Reign: A View from a Progressive Urban Parish*, by Peter G. Elliott, p. 257.



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