

**Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ \* Los Angeles**

**May 28, 2017 \* Ordination of Lydia Mulkey**

**Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister**

**Ephesians 6:13-18 (NRSV)**

13 Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. 14 Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of **truth** around your waist, and put on the breastplate of **righteousness**. 15 As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of **peace**. 16 With all of these, take the shield of **faith**, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. 17 Take the helmet of **salvation**, and the sword of the **Spirit**, which is the word of God. 18 Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end **keep alert** and always **persevere in supplication for all the saints**.

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**“A Letter to the Church”**

**by Carlo Carreto, from The God Who Comes**

How baffling you are, oh Church, and yet how I love you! How you have made me suffer, and yet how much I owe you! I would like to see you destroyed, and yet I need your presence. You have given me so much scandal and yet you have made me understand what sanctity is. I have seen nothing in the world more devoted to obscurity, more compromised, more false, and yet I have touched nothing more pure, more generous, more beautiful. How often I have wanted to shut the doors of my soul in your face, and how often I have prayed to die in the safety of your arms.

No, I cannot free myself from you, because I am you, though not completely. And besides, where would I go? Would I establish another? I would not be able to establish it without the same faults, for they are the same faults I carry in me. And if I did establish another, it would be my Church, not the Church of Christ. I am old enough to know that I am no better than anyone else.

**Love and War**

One of my dearest friends and mentors, the Rev. Bee Neufeld, grew up in rural North Dakota. She had any number of pets over the years, but three most memorable were two skunks named Sprinkle and Stinkle – and a porcupine (whose name I don't remember but whom we might call Snuggles). It is interesting to note that skunks don't spray unless they are startled or afraid – so they made excellent pets. Even so, there was definitely an odor that clung to Bee – even when the pets were home and she was at school – which led to some amount of teasing. But she loved those creatures to no end.

I believe this was the best preparation for ministry ever. Bee became a social worker and then, because women ministers were rarely hired by churches in her day, she became a lifetime interim – chronically temporary – helping congregations through the best and worst of transitions – including a stint at Mt. Hollywood. Her ministry led to Mt. Hollywood becoming Open and Affirming – thank you Bee! She could handle just about anything – and she could love just about anyone – as proven by Sprinkle, Stinkle and Snuggles.

Many of us who have lived within any church community can attest to the truth that there is a plethora of prickly, stinky, unusual, hard to love people that constitute the Body of Christ. And anyone who would choose to lead and collaborate with such a motley bunch has to be crazy. Well Lydia, welcome to the club!

You grew up Southern Baptist, a preacher's kid, lesbian and sensitive to the suffering in the world. These constitute four strikes against you in this judgmental society – but you chose to flourish – and turn your liabilities into strengths. Your father, the pastor of First Baptist Church of Deland, Florida, (a hotbed of moderate viewpoints) commented that if one of his children were going to be a pastor, it would be his daughter. It turns out he was prophetic.

You told me that you first felt a pull toward ministry when you were in high school and started down that road. But life took twists and turns until you got to Mt. Hollywood in 2007. Here you finally found a theological home and felt like you could answer the call authentically.

Seven years later 2014 Allan Carp, our Trustee and one of our favorite porcupines, wrote this in a letter of recommendation:

Lydia is like a flower that has blossomed and grown. When I first met Lydia she seemed to be somewhat shy and reserved. Little by little I got to know her better and I watched her grow. No matter what job she takes on, she gives it her all and makes it look effortless, which I know it is not... She has many talents and I think is the originator of the term “multi-tasking”. She is a natural with children of all ages. They respect her because she respects them.

Children (of all ages) – much like skunks and porcupines – respect and love those who respect and love them. Your natural ability for ministry has been shining through all along.

In preparation for this day, I've been reading a remarkable document – the “Ordination Paper of Lydia Mulkey” written in January 2016 – the ordination paper I wish I'd written. Here are some key passages that describe more than anything your calling and the reasons why we are here today to ordain you.

You begin your paper with a quotation from Sandra M. Levy, clinical psychologist, Episcopal priest and author:

“Our capacity to imagine the unseen, our power to create a new world vision for ourselves, our ability to transcend the concrete given and envision a future filled with hope and promise—these lie at the core of religious faith and its development.”

Sandra M. Levy, *Imagination and the Journey of Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 112.

Now more than ever we need leaders who can transcend the horrors of our time and create a new world vision filled with hope. This is where you begin. And you continue:  
Our God has the potential to appear at any and every moment to restore hope. My call is to tell the old stories until they awaken a stubborn belief in a future where God breaks in once again and life breaks open with new possibility...  
The story of God’s in-breaking that most inspires me toward a better future is the story of Jesus.

You note that Martin Luther, in his move to wrestle biblical interpretation out of the hands of priests and give it to the people, landed us in a precarious place.

Luther’s way of reading is “The reader alone confront[ing] the text, without the intervention of the church and its theology, and seek[ing] to avoid ‘multiple’ meanings.”

David Jasper, *A Short Introduction to Hermeneutics*, 57.

...When those in power are left alone to interpret scripture, that interpretation will inevitably benefit those in power and will be detrimental to the powerless...  
I feel it is my duty as a preacher and teacher to allow the text to be informed by God’s beloved people on the margins and their unique experiences.

As you defend and describe your choice of the United Church of Christ as your denominational home, you say

...We believe that **unity** is part of God’s design, and part of God’s toolkit for healing our world... The development of this denomination was not just a product of the ecumenical movement; it was a theological statement.

And:

Like our development, our polity is first and foremost a theological statement. God covenants with us. We are a people of free will, given the option to be in relationship with and live in the ways of the God who is love. We are also free to choose not to do that. **God does not lord power over us, coerce us, or force us to be a part of love’s work in the world.** Instead, we are invited to work with God’s power dwelling within us, toward a better future. **In the same way, we do not force or coerce one another. Instead of holding power over one another in a hierarchy, we covenant to hold power with one another.**

“We covenant to hold power with one another.” This is borne out today as you suffer the ritual of laying on of hands of everyone here – the people ordaining their clergy – not to rule over them but to serve among them. You made note of the UCC language about this:

The ordained person is “set apart.”

“Order for Ordination to Ministry,” United Church of Christ, December 29, 2015, <http://www.ucc.org/education/polity/pdf-folder/order-forordination-to-ministry-bow.pdf>.

But you also made your own note:

However, as an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ, I will carry that responsibility in covenant with each member of the church and with each setting of the church. We are all set apart for our particular ministries, and we are all called to unity and into covenant with one another in order to accomplish love’s work in the world...

In answer to my call, I will come to the table and join in this story. I will take the bread; I will bless it and give thanks for the opportunity to participate in the story. I will break it, and know that in our common brokenness we meet one another and God. I will give the bread away, so that God’s will gets done, and God’s kingdom comes on earth. The table tells the Christian story. By virtue of my call to ministry, I count myself among the keepers of this story. It is a story that is already and not yet, and gives us strength for today and hope for the future.

You chose to read a passage by Carlo Carreto this afternoon which declares your understanding of what lies ahead for you:

How baffling you are, oh Church, and yet how I love you! How you have made me suffer, and yet how much I owe you! I would like to see you destroyed, and yet I need your presence. You have given me so much scandal and yet you have made me understand what sanctity is. I have seen nothing in the world more devoted to obscurity, more compromised, more false, and yet I have touched nothing more pure, more generous, more beautiful.

“A Letter to the Church” by Carlo Carreto, from [The God Who Comes](#)

Knowing full well what you are in for, I want to offer to you the advice of one of our motliest, hardest to love, prickliest ancestors in the faith – St. Paul – in his letter to the church in Ephesus:

Take up the **whole armor of God**, so that you may be able to...**stand firm**.

Fasten the **belt of truth** around your waist, and put on the **breastplate of righteousness**...

Remembering always that this is righteousness, not self-righteousness.

As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you **ready to proclaim the gospel of peace**.

Heaven knows we’re going to need those shoes in the days ahead.

Take the **shield of faith**...the **helmet of salvation**, and the **sword of the Spirit**, which is the word of God.

**Pray** in the Spirit at all times... keep **alert** and always **persevere** in supplication for all the saints...

...those saints being all those who occupy God's kin-dom – but especially those on the margins – the Sprinkles and Stinkles and Snuggles of the world.

You told your discernment committee that one Sunday early in your time at Mt. Hollywood, you attended a meeting of the women's group. At the end, a lesbian couple gave everyone a gift. It was the following prayer by Sue Monk Kidd, printed on hand-made paper:

To be fully human, fully myself,  
To accept all that I am, all that you envision,  
This is my prayer.  
Walk with me out to the rim of life,  
Beyond security.  
Take me to the exquisite edge of courage  
And release me to become.

Today, again, you are released so that you may become.

Your father once encouraged you by saying that we all must do the thing that makes our hearts beat faster. And you claim that ministry is that thing for you.

Your heart must be pounding about now.

Let's get you ordained so you can get on with it!