

+ The Ordination and Installation of Christopher Ryan +

God’s Word comes to us from Paul’s letter to the Christians in Phillipi, where he writes: “Every time I pray for all of you, I do it with joy. I can do this because of the partnership we’ve had with you in the Good News from the first day you believed until now. I’m convinced that God, who began this good work in you, will carry it through to completion on the day of Christ Jesus.” This is the word of the Lord.

“Every time I pray for all you, I do it with joy. I can do this because of the *partnership* we’ve had...” It’s that word “partnership” that I’d like to focus on today. There are a couple of ways it functions in our setting here. There is the partnership between you, Chris, and St. Mark Lutheran Church. And there is the partnership that exists between us, from this day forward, as fellow pastors. In both cases, it’s not as if that partnership is just beginning. By God’s design, we have been serving together for a number of years at this point. We have talked a lot of theology and practice; experienced van breakdowns in central Pennsylvania, visited giant golf tees in rural Illinois and enjoyed some of the best barbeque St. Louis has to offer, and, oh yeah, the seminary stuff. But today we have reached an important milestone that it is right to acknowledge. Today we celebrate the power of God’s calling on your life, all of which gives us the chance to remember from God’s Word what this unique relationship between congregation and pastor consists of.

A God-pleasing partnership in the Good News; what does it look like?

First of all, listen to the way Paul talks to the Philippian Christians. He thanks God for the memories he has of them. He prays for them with joy. He sees God at work in them. This is a partnership built on love. This partnership was born in Christ and established through Christ. It is the partnership that develops when a handful of people recognize themselves as sinners, as people who would be utterly lost without Jesus, which is humbling. But then, we also share in the same Savior when the Spirit points us to Him. None of us deserve heaven; all of us who trust in Jesus receive it. Faith that trusts in Jesus’ sacrifice and risen life also enables us to see Jesus at work in each other—remember how Paul put it: “I’m convinced that God, who began this good work in you, will carry it through to completion on the day of Christ Jesus.” Recognizing the Lord of heaven and earth at work in each other is where this partnership begins.

Another thing that characterizes a true partnership in the Gospel is when the partners play to their strengths and gladly accept their roles. It's true; there are tasks that are peculiar to the pastoral office, and the pastoral office itself is God's idea. Paul told the elders in Ephesus, "Pay attention to yourselves and to the entire flock in which the Holy Spirit has made you guardians, to feed the church of the Lord which he acquired with his own blood." Now you heard that, right? The Good Shepherd has given little shepherds—pastors—to his Church to feed and to guard the flock. But part of being a good partner on the pastor's side means using this authority with great humility, and dare I say, a sanctified sense of humor. One of my favorite professors, Dr. James Bollhagen of Concordia Theological Seminary once wrote about this:

*After spending several months teaching the truths of God's Word to an adult confirmation class and demanding their undivided attention, it was inevitable that one of the newcomers to the Lutheran Church would ask, "Just how shall I address you?" My stock answer was: "You can call me Your Holiness." After a brief flash of panic in the questioner's eyes, a smile would creep across his face. In a sense, a healthy pastoral relationship was established in that moment. The confirmand knew that when I was dealing with the business of Word and Sacrament, utmost respect and ears open were essential; but my self-deprecation also led him to see a man who could play softball with him (and strike out), a man who had cars that stalled, who actually had a sense of humor, who got sick, who could say some mighty stupid things about the business world or gardening. Here was a man just like him. On one hand, I was always known to him as "Pastor." On the other hand, I was human and everything that goes along with that designation.*

Now, on the other side of this partnership is the congregation—the people. You should rightly expect your pastor to be a servant—to serve you with the gifts God gives through his Church. But that, in turn, will create *in you* the desire to be a servant, as Jesus himself comes to live in you through Word and Sacrament ministry. Part of the joy of being in a partnership in the gospel is exploring together—pastor and people—what we can do to serve our neighbors. Identifying strengths as a congregation, playing to those strengths, considering the Scriptural advice of a pastor who loves you and has your best interest in mind. Respecting the fact that your shepherd will have to give an account for his ministry to the Chief Shepherd—you play a crucial part in that. This is serious stuff. It is also exciting

and energizing and just the sort of movement that I know Chris Ryan is passionate about.

I would be remiss if I did not also mention that a partnership in the gospel, since it's about THE GOSPEL, presumes that genuine forgiveness will be given and received between both parties. Forgiveness in Christ is what holds the partnership together. To quote Dr. Bollhagen again, "*The church is not a place where people are granted forgiveness only if they can first prove that they don't need it.*" Did you get that? I'll repeat it. A partnership in the good news puts the good news to work. It lives the good news of Jesus' forgiveness. It has to—or the partnership will crumble. In a strange way, it's almost as if a partnership in Christ really hasn't started until someone does something wrong to the other, and then repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation is experienced. In other words, I know that I feel closest to the people who have forgiven me the most. Let's pledge today to make St. Mark a place where forgiveness not just talked about, but practiced, and lived out in Jesus' name and power.

Finally, Chris, with all the changes going on, with all the hopes and expectations that you're dealing with, your partnership with your Lord Jesus is being tested. Especially on a day like this, we pastors are reminded of how utterly dependent we are on Jesus for the ability to answer this calling. And there is a tendency to wonder about: will I be able to do this? When I find myself asking these questions, I find great relief in these words, "Not I, but Christ in me." This is what God is calling you to give the people of St. Mark. You can't fix their problems, but Christ can. You can't heal their diseases or broken hearts, but Christ can. "Not I, but Christ in me." That's the partnership you have with Jesus, and I'm convinced that God, who began this good work in you, will carry it through to completion on the day of Christ Jesus.

Chris, I hope you have a sense of how thankful we all are for you, for Kim, and your family. It's a true partnership God has created among us. He started it. He will complete it. Christ in us.