

Proverbs 1: 20-21, 8: 1-3, 9: 1-6, 10

I John 4: 7-12, 16

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Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

The Ordination of Lynn Margaret Hasselbarth to the Office of Teaching Elder

In his insightful and challenging book, Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life, Franciscan Fr. Richard Rohr affirms what all cultures and spiritual traditions have observed and taught. There are two fundamental tasks in life: building the container for our daily life; and developing the life that the container is meant to hold.

In the first stage of life we seek to create a solid foundation for future growth. We seek validation as individual people; develop trustworthy beliefs and values to guide us; as we grow we strive to make our place in the world, training for careers, building financial security for ourselves and our families.

Problems develop, however, when we mistake the *container* for the life which the container is meant to *hold*. Instead of seeing the container of life as in service to a deeper spiritual reality we treat the container as all there is. Whereas the container serves us by giving us a basic security and trust that God and the world operate according to understandable and predictable laws, the life that the container is meant to hold is full of contradictions, disillusionment, doubt and suffering. As this happens, almost always beginning in adolescence, we begin to experience a discrepancy between the world we were brought up to believe in and the world we experience—the world as it actually is.

There are three main responses to this crisis of identity and world view. The first is to throw out the container. We see this most often with self-proclaimed atheists. Their original container was built around the idea that there is a perfect world order. When confronted with

the very real evil in the world and the obvious fact that often the wicked prosper and virtuous people suffer. In the face of genocide and utter disregard for human life and the created world, often perpetrated by people in the name of God, they conclude with some justification that a God who would permit this to happen either does not exist or is not worthy of worship. Others live with an agnosticism which protects them from disappointment but denies access to deeper meaning.

The second response is to *deny* the reality of the ambiguity of life with its paradoxes and tragedies. This response cannot live in such a complex and unpredictable world. When apparently good people suffer whether by death or catastrophic illness there must be a reason for it. Either it is for their own good or they have some secret sin which is worthy of punishment. Natural disasters are declared to be acts of God punishing whole communities.

The third response comes from the Bible, specifically from the 55th chapter of the prophet Isaiah:

Seek the Lord while he may be found. Call upon him while he is near.
Let the wicked forsake their way and the unrighteous their thoughts.
Let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy upon them,
and to our God. That he may abundantly pardon.
*For my thoughts are not your thoughts; nor are my ways your ways,
says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways
higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*
(55: 6-9)

In the context of the two stages of life, God through Isaiah clearly indicates that the life the container is meant to hold calls us to a courageous release of our carefully constructed world views and thought patterns. God calls us to be willing to accept the idea that we can never climb into heaven and return with the certainty that we know God's will or God's thoughts or God's ways. We are called to a life of rigorous honesty willing to expose all in us

that seeks a secure understanding of the way of God and how the world operates. The cultivation of the life that the container is meant to hold brings us to a respectful but nevertheless fearless skepticism—*not about God* but about our assumptions *about God* and how God relates to the world.

In short, we are called to the life of discernment, skillful listening to the movements of our lives. We are called to discern with faith—what the writer of Hebrews calls the “conviction of what we cannot see” but nevertheless trust to be real. In the Hebrew scriptures there is a word for this skillful listening and life of faith: *wisdom*.

The word translated as wisdom at root indicates *skill*. Wisdom begins with the assumption that even our highest knowledge is nothing compared with the vastness of the creator of the universe. As one of my prize bible students twenty years or more ago—a woman of 75 years put it, “Wisdom is *knowing* that you *don’t know*.” This is the meaning of the phrase in Proverbs that “the fear—the deep reverence—of the Lord is *the beginning* of wisdom.” (1:7)

This seeking the Lord in the here and now is difficult. It calls us to be willing to abandon many of our carefully protected and largely unexamined assumptions about God which are based on a fear of “losing ourselves”. Jesus clearly teaches that the way to the life *that really is life* involves a willingness to lose that life for the life God in Christ wants us to have.

It is interesting to me that in the passages from Proverbs which Lynn has selected; wisdom is pictured as calling out “from the streets.” This suggests to me that the life that our container is meant to hold comes from beyond the world we think we know. Human concepts are obliterated in the vastness of God. We are called truly to become naked as newborn babies. Jesus called this being born again. And it initiates us into what Fr. Rohr calls “falling upward” in

the second task of life. It takes courage to do this. This journey is not to be done alone but in community. It is to be done in fragile, tender associations of people of faith in partnership with guides who share the seeking of wisdom and who fundamentally trust that the source and motivation of all wisdom is love—a love we dare to trust is fully demonstrated in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth who many of us call the Christ.

On this day the battered and much maligned container of the *ekklesia*—the church has borne fruit out of the life that it holds so tenderly. Out of her journey Lynn Hasselbarth has followed the path of wisdom and love and that path has led her to this moment. It is affirmed by her own sense of call; the conviction of the larger community of faith—this congregation and the Presbytery, and it has been confirmed by the community of the Concord Presbyterian Church. And Lynn, I know that you will receive a charge soon. But as one who has been privileged to walk with you these nine years I ask you to hold this thought in your heart: Love this frail and tender container of the church, the community of faith and the larger church of which you are a part. But may your heart be set on wisdom born of love. And when all is not perfect recall to mind Paul’s wonderful words, “We hold this treasure in cracked clay pots, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power is from God and not us.” (2 Corinthians 4:7) Amen.