

Consecration of Bishop Geoff Woodcroft

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St. John's Cathedral Winnipeg, MB

Sermon written and presented by:

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Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada

John 21: 15 - 17

Geoff, Geoff, Geoff... Are you ready for this?

Maybe it would be better for me to ask the congregation if they are ready for this. Because let's face it, you will be a change to what people have known. Bishop Don has faithfully led the diocese and he brought with him to that calling his own style, his own personality, and his own understanding of how God was leading the Diocese of Rupertsland.

You, Geoff, will bring your own style, focus, and personality to the position. And while some are looking forward to your leadership, some are probably also a little apprehensive. For every person that wants change, there is another who wonders just what that change will bring and why we can't just keep it the way it has always been.

I'm speaking from experience here. In my call as the Bishop of the Manitoba Northwestern Ontario Synod of the ELCIC, people are both expectant and hesitant. And like you, I feel that this call to the office of bishop is in an opportunity for us to renew what it means to be followers of Jesus today. It is a time for us to move the church forward and for us to understand new ways of being the church.

And brother, I am so happy to be on this road with you. I am happy to be walking beside you in this episcopal calling.

But before we start feeling too self-important, we need to remember something that can't be forgotten. This call is not about you. It's not about Bishops, Priests, and Deacons. It's not about Wardens, parishes, or manses. It's not about finances and committees. It's not even about the congregations.

This ministry that you are called to is about Jesus.

Geoff, you are not being set aside to save the church. You are not being set aside to 'bring in all the young people' or to revolutionize church. You are not being set apart just to maintain what has always been.

You are being called by Jesus to carry on his work. You are being set apart to be a shepherd tending a flock. You are being set apart to love and serve God's people through the gifts and abilities that God has given you. You are being called to lead at a difficult time for the church in our society. You are being set apart to help feed the church at a point in history when we have the most we have ever had, and yet also perceive more scarcity that we have ever known.

And it's tough. It is incredibly difficult to balance competing interests, to avoid offending most people with every decision, to learn what you need to know in a very short amount of time, and to maintain your inner sense of what is most important in your ministry.

I really hope that you will be able to maintain your focus in ministry, because I think that it is needed more than ever in our church.

If you <congregation> have ever had a conversation with Geoff, then you probably already know what his ministry focus is: Generosity. Or, maybe a better word would be: Abundance. Geoff has

been able to see into our culture of consumption and our rabid need to have more. He has critiqued our endless insistence that we live in a society of scarcity. He is laser-focused on helping people see that God has, actually, already provided all that we need and more to live an incredibly abundant life.

And that abundance manifests itself in our lives as generosity, service, reconciliation, equality, and faithful living. When we are freed from thinking about ourselves, we are able to see the need of others and provide for them like Jesus has called us to do.

You see, in John's gospel, that is the point. Jesus questioned Peter so that he could lead his disciple to a promise of providing for the flock. Jesus wanted to make sure that people were tended to after he was gone. This isn't a reading about bishops or priests or conveying an order of ministry – it is a reading about feeding people out of the abundance that God has fed us with.

And who does that work? Jesus knew that people who really and truly loved him would be able to serve and feed others. So he took someone with a proven track record of falling short and gave them one of the most important roles to carry on the ministry that Jesus began. Jesus handed over this ministry to his disciples. This was a moment when Jesus gave the ministry to all believers – to you and me.

Yes, Geoff is given the ministry of oversight and shepherding. His role is pointing our church to the places where God is providing the sustaining and nurturing food that we need. It is a ministry of trying to keep us together even when we want to wander off or don't have the sense to stay put.

But it is not Geoff's flock. He is not tending to his sheep. As a bishop, Geoff is simply carrying on Jesus' work in the world. He will try to lead people to where he thinks we will find nourishment and safety, but ultimately, God is the one who provides, who feeds, who watches and protects.

Geoff will try to steer and nudge us in the right direction. He will try to coax us onto a better path. He will, every once in a while, use a hook to drag us back from walking off a cliff. But he will be doing it on behalf of Jesus.

More than anything, Geoff's role is to teach us that Jesus has given this ministry to each of us. Every person in this building is called through baptism into the ministry of feeding God's people. Each person is called into a relationship with Christ so that, out of our love for Jesus, we will be able to tend to the needs we see in the world.

We are not stupid sheep who need someone to do the work for us and to spoon feed us everything. We are God's people. We are Jesus' flock. We are sent to minister to the world in Jesus' name.

It is not Geoff alone who will do that work on our behalf. It can't be. I don't know if you know this, but *every* bishop is woefully inadequate to carry on that task alone. We need... the world needs... Jesus needs *all* of us to step into that calling and ministry. It is who we are as disciples of Jesus in the world today.

And I am excited to see how the people and leaders of the Diocese of Rupertsland live out that calling. It could be through ways that your parishioners engage in missional ministry and thinking. It may be through support of wider church ministries. It may be through the countless teams, committees, and groups within our congregations; or through the ways that people reach out into our communities with the gospel. It could be through engaging in deeper personal spiritual practices and acts of devotion.

I am also excited to see how we, as Lutherans and Anglicans, will live out that calling together. We have opportunities to work together in ministry on national initiatives and through shared worship and congregational life in our parishes. We can support each other in our engagement

with the neighbourhoods where we live. We will continue to grow in our understanding of what it means to minister with, support, and learn from indigenous communities in our walk towards reconciliation and healing.

God is continuing to work with and through each of us as baptized children of God, fed and nourished by Christ, and sent out into the world in service of God's people.

Look what you get to be a part of Geoff! It is a privilege to be able to lead and be a part of the work that God is doing in the Diocese of Rupertsland. But your new role will change things compared to your ministry at St. Paul's. In my vast experience (officially five weeks now), it has become clear to me that the office of Bishop is, largely, an administrative role.

You will get lost in budgets and human resources questions. You will have a lot of paperwork to file or to stack. You will hear and see the worst of the what the church is. You will be dragged into petty arguments. You will need to provide a calm and pastoral presence when you want to scream out loud. You will need to show patience and pastoral care when people just don't seem to get it and when you want to bang your head against the wall. Things will eventually get to the point where you'll wonder why, in addition to all the liturgical vestments and symbols of the office you receive today, they didn't also give you a pair of hip-waders.

Those are the tough parts. There is gift and blessing too. But sometimes we get stuck with the 'job.'

And so, Geoff, one prayer I have for you as you are consecrated is that 'the job' won't take away from your understanding of what Jesus has called you to do. I hope that even in the most challenging times, you will remember and know in your soul that you are not left to shepherd alone – that Jesus is the one shepherding you. I hope that you will faithfully rely on God to feed you, protect you, lead you, and give you rest. I hope that you continue to remember each day that

you are also part of the flock that Jesus gathers and sets apart for ministry. I hope that you will be able to start each day knowing that you are a baptized child of God who has been called to minister in the world with the gifts and calling that God has blessed you with.

Because I see those gifts in you. These people see those gifts in you. The diocese sees those gifts in you. And we are all excited to serve God together with you, to bring our congregations, ministries, and communities that life giving message of forgiveness, life, and peace that we have all come to know through Jesus Christ.