

God's Grace is Sufficient

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Friends, we gather in this stunning sanctuary to bear witness to the power of God's grace! Our testimonies are bound together in Christ, yet unique and too many to number, like exquisite snowflakes drifting down. In the hush of your hearts—in all of you—the angels hear a polyphony of praise! We praise Christ the Glorious Wellspring in whom we have precious water gushing up to eternal life! ^{John 4:14} We honor Christ the Brooding Mystery who brings into being a holy Truth that is queer and unexpected and dazzling! ^{John 1:5} We dance in Christ the Radiant Light, ^{John 8:12; 9:5} whose illumination makes our paths clear and our hearts joyful! And we laud the Cosmic Christ who is Trans: transcendent, fully God and fully human, invincibly True beyond every border and binary, the Shepherd ^{John 10:11, 14} who guides our own transitions and transformations of body, mind, and spirit as we grow ever more fully into the image of God!¹ Oh, we sing praises to the One who has brought us here! And this afternoon, our polyphony of praise includes a brand-new melodic line: we affirm with deep gladness the purposes of God unfolding in the life of Rowan Julian Larson.

Priesthood. Before this moment: a lifelong call, unfolding in times of struggle and times of clarity, taking shape through theological learning and the quest for spiritual belonging, refined in ministry at Grace Episcopal in Newton. Rowan has *always*

been called, as each one of you has been called, to draw near to the Source of Life in whom every creature lives and moves and has its being. You are called. Rowan is called—and today, they will step into priesthood.

This is no small thing Rowan is undertaking. They are brave to do this! The demands of ordained ministry are rigorous. You can never be holy enough (you literally can't, but also, some people won't let you forget it). Disgruntled folks will project onto you everything they find objectionable about the history of Christianity. You know, right, that in the early centuries of the Christian Church, some believers who were tapped for priesthood would run away and hide? One such fugitive in the fourth century was so eloquent, he was known as “Golden-Mouth”: John Chrysostom. Famously devout, always eager to study Scripture, dedicated to constant prayer. Chrysostom learned that a Commission on Ministry, if you will, was coming to make him a priest, and he took off—he bolted and went into hiding, he was so keenly aware of his own unworthiness and the impossible demands of priestly ministry.

So: who better to tell us about priesthood? Here's John Chrysostom.

First: integrity is everything! A priest must be “many-sided, not ... a flatterer, or a hypocrite; but absolutely open and frank of speech,” especially when dealing with those in power.² That criterion alone could make conflict-averse ordinands run away screaming. Absolutely open and frank of speech: it takes authenticity, prophetic vision, and courage to serve our God.

- * You have to BE YOURSELF,
- * you have to SEE THE TRUTH OF LIFE in all its fragility,
- * and you have to DARE TO SERVE ANYWAY.

True for every believer, by the way, not just for priests—in case lay persons here are all, “Thank goodness that isn’t for me!” Yes, it is ... for all of us!

To love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength and the neighbor as ourselves takes *relentless* authenticity, prophetic vision, and courage.

But rejoice, friends: God’s grace is sufficient for you! ^{2 Cor 12:9}

Next: the Eucharist. On this, Chrysostom holds a stratospherically high view of priestly authority. He cites John 6, where Jesus says, “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day.” ^{John 6:54} Because priests consecrate the bread and wine through which communicants encounter the risen Christ, per Chrysostom, priests “are responsible for our birth from God ... our true emancipation.... Parents [may] bring us into this life,” he acknowledges, but “priests [bring us] into the life to come.”³ A staggering responsibility! Imagine if a priest were to shame or insult or wound someone, and that beleaguered soul decides they’ve had it—they never come to Communion again. We know this happens. Chrysostom has no doubt that such ministers will be held accountable on the last day. So you have to walk in love always! ^{Eph 5:2} And cling to this promise: God’s grace is sufficient for you!

Chrysostom says priests “must be sober and clear-sighted and possess a thousand eyes looking in every direction,” because priests live “not for [themselves] alone, but for a great multitude.”⁴ Priests dare not “live carelessly,” as other people do.⁵ Rather, “the priest must be armed with weapons of steel—intense earnestness and constant sobriety of life,”⁶ to tend the flock of the Shepherd whom we serve. Priests must never pander in order to win affirmation or praise; instead they have to “bear insult and abuse and vulgar language and taunts ... and complaints made at random,” Chrysostom says.⁷ Life as a spiritual leader. And more and more, it’s life for many who speak truth in this age of toxic social discourse. Speaking of which: the priest’s own “shortcomings ... cannot be concealed,” Chrysostom warns; “even the most trivial [flaws] soon get known,” so priests must guard their words and deeds, lest “their faults make [others] careless in the quest [for] virtue.”⁸ Everything you do matters! So “let all that you do be done in love.” ^{1 Cor 16:14}

By this point, you might be reaching desperately for “pray without ceasing,” and you’d be right. We have to pray, to go deep in prayer as often as we can.⁹

Yes, pray without ceasing, ^{1 Thess 5:17}

pray in action and in contemplation—

and trust that God’s grace is sufficient for you!

Rowan: as you prepare to step into priesthood moments from now, I offer you a charge from John Chrysostom: for the love of God, tend the beauty of your soul from all that would distort or harm it. You know something about that work already.

Chrysostom is powerful on this: “The beauty of [the priest’s] soul must shine ... to gladden and enlighten the souls of [all] who see.... The soul of the priest ought to blaze like a light illuminating the world.”¹⁰ What a glorious vision! Be open and frank in speech, live every day with spiritual earnestness, and let your soul blaze like an unquenchable light as you look for God.

Search for God’s love in the faces of friends and strangers;

Listen for God’s voice in the song of this beautiful earth and the howls and murmurs and cries of its creatures;

Look for places of brokenness where compassion can bring healing.

In all of that, I promise: God’s grace will be sufficient for you!

And there’s more good news, for you and for all of us.

We have a spiritual ancestor to guide us: someone who was enveloped by the radiance of the terrifying angel Gabriel and did not run screaming but rejoiced:

Mary, the mother of Jesus—afraid, overwhelmed,

propelled by the Holy Spirit into a future she could barely imagine,

yet singing her Magnificat with authenticity, prophetic vision, and courage.

“My soul magnifies the Lord!”

She sings a Holy One mighty and merciful,

One who brings down the powerful and lifts up the lowly,

One who feeds the hungry.

Oh, the jubilation of it!

Today we stand with her.

We stand with Mary in the lineage of all who cry out fiercely for justice.

We stand with Mary, with Julian of Norwich,

with all who have staked their lives on God's mercy,

laying claim to **love**¹¹ as the measure of life's deepest meaning.

And now ... it's time.

We'll say the Creed. Then Rowan will step into a liminal, holy space ...

and the Holy Spirit will propel them into a radiant future

that we can barely imagine!

In the Name of the One who makes all things new: Rev 21:5

Jesus Christ, to whom be all honor, glory, and praise, now and forever.

Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Carolyn J. Sharp

18 December 2021

Advent 4C

Micah 5:2–5a; Psalm 80:1–7; Hebrews 10:5–10; Luke 1:39–55

Preached at Church of the Redeemer in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, which

hosted the ordination of Rowan Julian Larson to the Episcopal priesthood

on behalf of Grace Episcopal Church in Newton, Massachusetts

¹ Those eager to learn more about the flourishing arena of queer theology might explore the writings of Marcella Althaus-Reid, Patrick S. Cheng, Jacob J. Erickson, Laurel C. Schneider, and Linn Marie Tonstad, among others. A helpful overview is Chris Greenough's *Queer Theologies: The Basics* (London: Routledge, 2019).

² John Chrysostom, *Six Books on the Priesthood*, Popular Patristics 1 (translated by Graham Neville; Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1977), 142.

³ Chrysostom, *Six Books on the Priesthood*, 73–74.

⁴ Chrysostom, *Six Books on the Priesthood*, 82.

⁵ Chrysostom, *Six Books on the Priesthood*, 106.

⁶ Chrysostom, *Six Books on the Priesthood*, 86.

⁷ Chrysostom, *Six Books on the Priesthood*, 83.

⁸ Chrysostom, *Six Books on the Priesthood*, 85.

⁹ Medieval mystic Johannes Tauler (c. 1300–1361) taught that God is born continually in the heart of the believer who yearns for God. Christ is born in our hearts ceaselessly—“every day and every hour,” Tauler says—when we direct our life to knowing and loving God. For Tauler, this was especially fruitful in a praxis of wordless contemplative prayer. He urges believers to cultivate “inner stillness and peace,” so that in the deep silence of the soul, God's Word can be born afresh. See Tauler's Sermon 1, which he preached on Christmas Day, in *Johannes Tauler: Sermons*, Classics of Western Spirituality (translated by Maria Shradly; New York: Paulist, 1985), 35–40.

¹⁰ Chrysostom, *Six Books on the Priesthood*, 85, 141.

¹¹ With Julian of Norwich on love as the deepest meaning of all that has been created and all that God purposes for living beings. See Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, Classics of Western Spirituality (translated by Edmund Colledge and James Walsh; New York: Paulist, 1978), 130, 134, 168, and *passim*.