

I Am Nothing
Celebration of New Ministry: Rev. Kathleen Hawkins-Berkowe
Ephesians 4:7, 11-16

One of my favorite singer-songwriters who probably most of you have never heard of, Pierce Petit, wrote a song describing his own sense of call as a songwriter; it's entitled *I am Nothing*

*I stutter when I try to speak the language of life
I want to shout out loud but I just cry inside
Sometimes it feels so holy sometimes so absurd
So who am I to try and put that into words*

*I am nothing
But the angels sometimes whisper in my ear
Yeah, they tell me things and then they disappear
Though I am nothing I sometimes like to make believe I hear*

*I stumble when I try to walk the straight and narrow
I have heard it said God's eye is on the lowly sparrow
Who in spite of everything will sing for all he's worth
You know sometimes I feel exactly like that bird*

*I am nothing
But the angels sometimes whisper in my ear
Yeah, they tell me things and then they disappear
Though I am nothing I sometimes like to make believe I hear*

Maybe it's odd to find inspiration in a song whose title is "*I am nothing*," but I do. For the song is a reminder to me that if I'm able to truly say something about God my inspiration comes from a source beyond me. "*The angels sometimes whisper in my ear.*" And what are *angels* but God's messengers? Those messengers come in many forms. Sometimes they come in the wonderful words of Holy Scripture. Sometimes also those messengers can come in the form of a distant memory from childhood, or an experience that seems to help make sense of a complicated scripture passage, or a song, or a family story, or something a child said in passing. The angelic whispering can come in almost any form that helps connect the words of scripture to daily life (mine and yours). "*Though I am nothing I sometimes like to make believe I hear.*"

The song speaks to me of my calling as a priest and preacher of God's Word. The wider Church calls and sets apart for a special ministry those who she recognizes as hearing those angels whispering in their ears. Yesterday Mother Kathleen was ordained to the sacred ministry of Presbyter or Priest in one of the largest Gothic cathedrals in the world – St. John the Divine in NYC. It was a glorious celebration with close to 100 priests in procession. The sound of that vast cathedral reverberates for a full 10 seconds and the organ fills it with a mighty rumble. Over 50 people from St. John's and L'Eglise de

L'Epiphanie made the trip to NYC, so we were well represented. Mother Kathleen pledged her loyalty to conform to the doctrine, discipline and worship of the Episcopal Church. The Bishop and all those priests laid their hands on her head and shoulders and prayed that the Holy Spirit would empower her for this new ministry. Today it is our honor and privilege to celebrate Mother Kathleen's new ministry as a priest and as St. John's new Assistant to the Rector.

What is a priest? **(1)** First of all a priest is a designated leader in the Church of Christ. She is one who has followed her own sense of call and inspiration and offered herself for the sacred role of ordained ministry. However, many feel that they are called but not many are chosen. She is also one who has been tested, tried and approved by various ecclesiastical authorities (including her own parish priest, parish call committee, Commission on Ministry, Standing Committee, General Ordination Examiners and Bishop). That process of testing and approval is long and arduous. She is also someone who has been educated, trained and seeped in Holy Scripture, in Church's tradition and practices. One is *seeped* in those things in seminary. In order to be a priest you also need to be called to a specific ministry. Once they are called, as Mother Kathleen has been called to be an ordained leader here in St. John's Church, they are sent into that new ministry in order to serve the wider Church. So a priest is a designated leader in the Church.

(2) Secondly a priest is someone who is called as an interpreter of God's Word, to preach and proclaim the Gospel – the Good News of Jesus Christ. *“The angels sometimes whisper in my ear.”* After a new priest is ordained and vested the Bishop gives her a Bible, saying *“Kathleen receive this Bible as a sign of the authority given you to preach the Word of God and to administer his Holy Sacraments.”*

(3) Third, a priest is called to be a teacher. This is the particular calling that Mother Kathleen has been given here at St. John's. She is in charge of our adult Christian formation. She is one designated to lead us in exploring and studying God's Word, the Scriptures. She is to help guide us in understand the meaning of the Church's tradition and how they apply to the challenges of today. She has the call to encourage us to know God, to recognize his presence and to share in God's life. She is a teacher about prayer. She is here to help us ask questions and explore for ourselves the Christian faith and life.

(4) Fourth, a priest is one who blesses. The unique role of the priest is to stand in the intersection between God and God's people and offer God's blessing. This is a sacramental role. The priest offers God's great blessing through Holy Communion, along with Deacons through the anointing of oil and prayers for healing, through Holy Baptism, by offering God's forgiveness to those who have confessed their sins and in joining together men and women in holy matrimony. The priest is one who blesses the congregation at the conclusion of worship and constantly reminds us of God's great blessing for all God's people.

(5) Fifth, a priest is one who is appointed to handle holy things. That is a responsibility that we can easily take too lightly. I like the words of writer Annie Dillard in her book, *Holy the Firm*:

On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.

All of us need to call to mind the amazing miracle of new life offered to us in these bits of bread and sips of wine. Today Mother Kathleen leads us in these holy mysteries for the first time as a priest in Christ's Church. A priest is appointed to handle holy things.

(6) Sixth and last and above all the Apostle Paul reminds us today in his letter to the Ephesians that a priest – along with all whom Christ inspires and calls to lead in his Holy Church – is called to be a servant/leader who equips the saints for the work of ministry. That's a priest's job description: to equip the saints (the people of God) for the work of ministry and the building up of the Body of Christ (his Church).

So today we celebrate not only Mother Kathleen, but the ministry we all share in Christ. For Paul promises that to each of us is given grace according to the measure of Christ's gifts. Some are appointed to specific ministries in the Church, but all are given gifts for ministry. And in all the gifts Christ has given to his people are for the equipping of his people and the building of his Body, the Church.

We are nothing, but the angels sometimes whisper in our ears. It is our experience of our own emptiness that allows us to sometimes hear God's messengers whispering in our ears. When we aren't so full of ourselves we can listen. When we recognize our own poverty of spirit we can also recognize the riches of God's grace.

How blessed we are today to celebrate the ministry of this immensely gifted, thoughtful woman who brings with her the depth of a lifetime of prayer and learning. How blessed we are to celebrate Mother Kathleen's new ministry as priest and her call to be among us as Assistant to the Rector at St. John's. How blessed we are to celebrate the ministry of Christ's love that we all share and of which Mother Kathleen is a servant/leader. **Amen.**