

**“From Ambivalence to Pure Joy”
(Ordination Sermon for Lynn Lingafelt)
Ephesians 4:1–6; Mark 1:16–20
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First Baptist Church Raleigh
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In his poem “The Lesson for Today” Robert Frost suggested an epitaph to go on his headstone, “I had a lover’s quarrel with the world.” It was a wonderful and concise way of describing the poet’s spirit — ever free to question, even criticize, but always out of love.

Baptists have a similar perspective on the sacred ritual of ordination. We believe in the priesthood of all believers, and thus everyone who chooses to follow Jesus, like Simon and Andrew, James and John, in the reading from Mark, is called by God to ministry. So, we can make the argument that everyone should be ordained, or no one should be ordained. And when we add the reality that ordination is mostly an affirmation of a person’s giftedness and calling, and a community has been doing that for over twenty-five years for someone, like Lynn, the natural reaction is ambivalence, if not outright resistance.

However, while all are called to ministry, some have a distinctive calling as leaders who embrace more responsibility. Furthermore, ordination is not just about human affirmation nor is it only for the benefit of the candidate. We may not use the word “sacrament” in Baptist settings, but there is more than human kindness in this sacred ritual. There is something of God that we do not want to miss. There is God’s blessing, like what Jesus hears when he rises from the waters of baptism, “You are my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” There is a sense of empowerment for our ministry. And these gifts of blessing and empowerment are not just for Lynn; they are for all of us.

So, we have a lover’s quarrel with the sacred ritual we celebrate this evening, Lynn has a lover’s quarrel with it, it’s why she has waited so long to request it. We question the need for ordination out of love, realizing that Lynn may not need it, though we do, but we do not question Lynn’s worthiness. Dan Day spoke for all of us at the

ordination council when he said he felt like he was fifteen years late for that meeting. Leah Reed put words on our thoughts when she said Lynn is a female Mister Rogers. We know Lynn, we have benefitted from her gifts, and we have wanted to formally bless her for a long time.

Whom do we know who has taken more seriously Jesus' calling to follow him, leaving whatever behind we must do so? Lynn didn't have to leave Scott and the kids when Myra Brickell made that offer for her to serve as children's minister, but she did have to leave a perceived calling to be at home full-time in light of a new calling. And she has made similar adjustments throughout her journey.

Whom do we know who has lived more consistently the counsel of Ephesians to lead a life worthy of our calling by being humble and gentle, patient and willing to bear with others in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace? Ministry is more about who we are than what we do, though the former shapes the latter, and Lynn does plenty for all of us, but who she is gives a clear and consistent witness to the Gospel.

Now, I have to confess that I wondered at first if anyone could really be that sweet. Most people who exude joy all the time, smile at everyone, and simply overflow with kindness are covering up for something — sadness, resentment, anger, even pure meanness. At the very least, underneath all the exuberance is a mixture of emotions. And Lynn has experienced different emotions. She has faced profound loss and demonstrated remarkable resilience. But over time I have discovered that she really is that sweet to the core.

I also have to confess that she can be an irritating colleague. Do you know what it is like to visit people, listen to them, pray with them, basically care for them in every way possible, you think... only to be followed by someone who does all this and brings flowers or more often food of some kind too? Ministry isn't a competition, but it's hard to compete! I am kidding... to a point... we all have a unique array of gifts and calling to be who we are and allow God to use us. Lynn does that faithfully, selflessly, joyfully for children and families and the rest of us.

She is not perfect, nor does she do everything well. For example, don't ask her to sing! I say that not because I have heard her but because

she doesn't allow anyone to hear her sing. But she does possess many gifts which she uses to fulfill one of the most sacred callings of all which is to nurture young, fragile lives full of potential in the love of God and God's people. Some people seem to look down on the nurture of children. Our culture certainly does not value early childhood education or educators, much less ministers who work with children. But there is nothing more important than this ministry, no time more critical for human and Christian development, no role more critical.

And Lynn has been doing this here for over twenty-five years! When I was doing doctoral work at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, a prominent graduate of that school left ministry at the peak of his work. Why did he do that? Was something wrong? Did he do something bad? No. So, why did he leave? He said — the relentless return of the Sabbath. It is relentless! There is a Sunday in every week! I get it!

But can you imagine the relentless return of Sunday School and extended session every week for twenty-five years, the relentless return of VBS for twenty-five years, the relentless return of RAs and GAs and retreats and camps and pool parties for twenty-five years in the same setting, long enough to have children of children in your care? Then, imagine doing all of that and more with ongoing creativity and enthusiasm, devotion and love? The old KJV uses the word “longsuffering” but with Lynn it is more like “enduringjoy.” How can we not want to bless and empower that?

The power to bless is one of the church's greatest gifts. Many books have been written on this subject. This church is particularly good at this, blessing children and parents, couples in marriage, people who go on mission trips, ministries like And Also with 'Cue, and the list goes on. As a minister, I have been privileged to bless homes and rehab centers, city councils and general assemblies, basketball courts and baseball stadiums, people at significant places in life and beloved pets.

This evening we bless Lynn Lingafelt, and doing so brings us pure joy! We pray it will for her too. But may we never forget about this gift. In a world where there is so much to tear people down, we have the power to bless. Let's use it! In God's grace, let's use it!