

Martha Highsmith – Answers to Ordination Questions

Will you seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love?

Jesus once had a conversation with a man who asked what he needed to do to inherit eternal life. In good rabbinic fashion, Jesus answered the man's question with a question of his own. 'What is written in the law? What do you read there?' And the man answered correctly: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself." (Luke 10:27) When the law speaks of loving God this way, it also forms a template for loving and serving God's people.

Pastoral ministry depends on energy: strength. There are long weeks, unexpected demands, people needing care, liturgy to craft, sermons to write. Energy is not to be confused with frenzy or frazzle! Serving with energy requires the discipline to take care of myself, to be organized, and to bring my best to my work with God's people.

Our ordination process demands a certain amount of intelligence (all that Greek and Hebrew...), but when scripture speaks of loving with "all your mind," I think it means more than just book sense. I seek to serve God's people by exercising common sense, as well, listening and learning from them, being guided by the collective wisdom, even as we try together to sort what is wise from what is foolish.

Perhaps I am most excited and challenged by the promise to serve with imagination, with soul. Ministry in the twenty-first century church both demands and nurtures imaginative approaches to our life of faith. Continuing to do the same things in the same ways as we did fifty years ago is not necessarily being faithful to this vow. The challenge is to hold to those practices that are enduring and should be unchanging, while at the same time being open to the moving of the Spirit. (Joan of Arc?)

Finally, I seek always to serve with love: heart. Perhaps we all encounter people that we don't like, but even so, we are called to love them. Love is not a feeling so much as it is a decision. In a world filled with rancor and division, it seems almost counter-cultural to love -- all the more reason to seek to serve in this way.

Do you accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God's Word to you?

Scripture is the doorway through which I encounter God, God's people, and Jesus. It is, as Calvin said, the lens that helps me see more clearly. I understand Scripture to be, at the same time, the record of particular people and their interpretation of events and relationship, and a living present Word to me. The Spirit continues to move me to new understandings of ancient texts, showing me how my story is part of God's story for all creation. When I pray with and study the Scripture, I feel I enter more fully in to the life of Christ, and that Christ enters more fully into my life. Through Scripture, God comforts me (Psalm 23), inspires me (Psalm 139, John 1), questions me (John 11:26), and challenges me (Luke 10:37). I experience the Bible as a living witness, showing the power and love and grace of God incarnate in Jesus. I love the intellectual work of word study and form criticism, but I see that work not as the end point but rather part of the way the Spirit opens my eyes and heart to God, the living God alive and at work in world and in my life.