

Sermon preached by The Rev. Michael C. Fedewa
Saturday, December 3, 2011
The Ordination of Nurya Love Parish
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
Grand Rapids, MI

Bishop Gepert, clergy, guests, members of St. Andrews, friends, and families.

Nurya let me say that I am honored to be preaching here this afternoon at this great and wonderful celebration. I am assuming that my years of experience are at least part of the reason that you have honored me with the privilege of preaching. You may assume from these years that I have at least some clue as to what it means to be an ordained priest in the Episcopal church. Well, I used to think I knew and understood this mysterious life of priesthood. But, the longer I live as priest, the less I understand. Still, even with my lack of understanding, I am honored - I truly am - to be preaching here this evening.

This past Tuesday as part of our staff meeting we were reflecting on the Gospel for tomorrow, the 2nd Sunday of Advent. The Gospel tomorrow will be about John the Baptist. That strange, mysterious and holy man who dressed in camels hair, and ate wild honey and locusts.. As part of that reflection, we wondered what the text was inviting us to do, be or change. Nurya answered that she was struck with the strangeness of John the Baptist. Nurya said that John's strangeness was an invitation to her to live more strangely.

Well, Nurya, I would like to offer the suggestion that in your life as an ordained priest, you will indeed be living a very strange life indeed. Stranger perhaps even than John's. Let's think for just a few minutes about just how strange that life is.

First Nurya, look at the clergy gathered here today. Are you really sure you want to become part of this group? Strange, very strange indeed. In a few minutes this group of men and women are going to lay their hands upon you and pray that the Spirit of God, the Spirit of the Creator of the Universe will descend upon you and make you a priest. Our belief is that this prayer and the prayer of the men and women present here today will release the power of the creator of the universe in and through you. As a priest, you will gather with Bishop Gepert and this group of priests to try to discern the will of God. Strange.

And it gets even stranger than that. As a priest people will ask you what they should call you. And, whether you answer that you would like to be called Nurya or Mother Nurya,, these people, some of whom will be more than twice your age will still call you father. Strange.

And it gets even stranger than that. Because you are a priest, you will be called into the most intimate and sacred moments of people's lives. At times of marriage people will ask you to bless them and make their two lives one. You will be invited to be with people in the first minutes after the birth of their children, and, in those moments after the miracle of birth, you will be asked to ask a blessing on a new born infant. At baptism you will anoint infants and adults and remind them that belong to Christ, that they belong to him forever. At times of illness, surrounded by the most expensive equipment in the world, in the midst of all the procedures that happen in hospitals, people will put their trust in you and will ask you to pray with them, to anoint them in order to assure them that even if their illness ends in physical death, they will not be separate from the life giving love of God.

And, Nurya, it gets even stranger than that. People will come to you, and share with the secrets of their life. The painful, broken, sin filled secrets. They will ask you to declare them forgiven. And, when you do, they will know the experience of God's forgiveness.

Nurya, every Sunday, given dozens and dozens of choices of what to do, people will come to Church to listen to you. They will give you their undivided attention, well maybe not undivided. But, they will come because they trust that the words you speak, the words you preach will communicate to them the love and mercy of God. People will come to hear you preach, seeking hope, seeking meaning, seeking an encounter with Jesus, seeking an encounter with God.

Nurya, on those Sundays, people will gather with you around a table of bread and wine, and with you and through your words, they will pray that the bread and wine will become the presence of Jesus. You will break that bread, and share that cup and through your hands, people will touch, and taste Jesus. In that bread and in that wine, they will come closer to Jesus, closer to God, and even closer to each other. And then, after they have eaten, after you bless them, they will leave that table and go into the world to do the work of God, to be the real presence of Jesus in the world.

My friend, you may not dressed in the skin of a camel, you may not feed on locusts and wild honey, but the work you do, the life you live is every bit as strange as anything that John the Baptist did. Nurya you want strange, you got it.

Nurya, this is not a strange that is either weird or crazy. This is a strange that is holy. This is the kind of strange that Moses encountered in that burning bush. Priesthood is a strange and holy life Nurya. Priesthood is a way of life that invites you to take off your shoes. As a priest you will every day be invited to remember that the ground you walk, the lives you people you meet, that lives that touch you are holy. In this strange life, in the lives of the people of God, Nurya, you will encounter God. Take your shoes off, and remember that the ground you walk is holy.

Nurya, take your shoes off often. Please be sure that you take the time, the hours each day, the days each week, the weeks each year to say "enough is enough". Take your time go home and take off your shoes and be with David, with Claire and with Nathan. The church is a holy place, the altar is holy, the pulpit is holy, the hospital is holy, the diocesan office is holy. But, Nurya the holiest place you will be each day, will be your home. Nurya every day you will meet holy people: men and women, young and old, rich and poor, broken and whole. But Nurya, the holiest people you are with each day will be your David, Claire and Nathan. Make time to take off your shoes and bask in your holy times at home, your holy times together as family.

You want strange. You got it. Nurya, The life of the priest is indeed strange, mysterious and holy. But Nurya, after all these years, I can honestly say that it is a life that is good, very good. Indeed, it is better than we could ever imagine, better than we could ever deserve.