

*He Who Makes the Melodies of Deliverance*

**SERMON  
FOR THE ORDINATION OF  
REV THOMAS MATTHEW RYBERG**

**SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 27, 2011  
LAS VEGAS, NV**

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***He Who Makes the Melodies of Deliverance***  
**Sermon for the ordination of Rev. Thomas**  
**Matthew Ryberg**  
**By: Rev. Emily Joye McGaughy**  
**February 27, 2011**

**Tom, in the language of the UCC book of worship about Ordination, today is a day when two major things happen. You are recognized and authorized. Let me be clear that God has done and is always doing both of those things in your life already. We are just here to say, “YEAH, we think so too.” And we are here to witness you saying “Yes, Lord, here I am.” Recognition and authorization. Us of you. And you before God. This is a big deal for the church, for our world, for your family and for you. On behalf of this gathered community and on behalf of our beloved people in Battle Creek, let me offer a specific word of gratitude to you. Thank you for taking the call upon your life seriously enough to do something this gutsy. Thank you for knowing that the Living God does not play and when it’s time to stand and deliver, it’s time to stand and deliver. Thank you for all the ways you stand and deliver us spiritually: in your music, in your empathic attendance in moments of pastoral care, in your public acts of witness to justice. The Christian Church is being made more righteous today because of your willingness to say “Yes.” Thank God. Thank you.**

**Recognition and authorization. That is the point of today’s liturgical gathering. There are some folks who will be about the business of official UCC authorization later in this service, so I’m taking it upon myself to make this sermon about recognition. And so I want to tell the story of the first time I met you and what got recognized that day.**

**June 1<sup>st</sup> 2010 was the day I first encountered Thomas Matthew Ryberg. It was a Tuesday in the Windy City. The sun was coming in and out of clouds and clergy between the ages of 20 & 30 were gathering at Chicago Theological Seminary—Tom’s alma mater—for a conference called “Shepherding the Shepherd.” Tom was leading worship, from the piano bench, for that conference, and I was in attendance. I came to that night’s worship service with a lot of what Jesus would call heavy burdens and weariness. I’d been in parish ministry for a total of 6 months, called specifically to do ministry that engages young folks and music had become the war between the generations in our church. Young people weren’t getting the music they wanted and therefore not coming to church. The elders in our community didn’t want to give away the music most meaningful to them. We were at a standstill. At that six month juncture I found myself wondering if I could do what I’d been called to do, found myself tired and irritated and a bit miffed about how God wanted me to proceed. I boarded the train to Chicago with a prayer. It wasn’t a sugar-coated prayer, but one of desperation: God help me out because I’m tired and I need you to do something here.**

**When I came into the Shepherding the Shepherd worship service on Tuesday night, it was early and most of the conference participants hadn’t arrived yet. Tom was playing a folky rendition of “Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing” with a young violinist in accompaniment. I was on the other side of the room, seated next to my partner, grateful for the time to just be in worship instead of having to lead worship. But as I watched them making music together, something inside of me opened. I found myself weeping in a good way. Something was**

**being touched. Something was being healed. There was a generous and profound creativity between the two of them: improvisational, relational artistry at its best. And whatever they were doing with those instruments began transforming ordinary space to extraordinary space.**

**Any of you who have heard Tom play know what I'm talking about. There is deliverance in his music; it moves you, lifts you (literally sometimes). There is healing in his music; it touches you and soothes you. The Holy Spirit is in his music; it's captivating and transformative. It draws you closer only to send you out more alive, more willing, more faithful. This is what he does. He is a music minister. This is who he is. Pastor at the piano bench.**

**I realized that weekend that he wasn't just leading worship beautifully, but that he was in fact the incarnate answer to my pre-train prayer. Out of the fount of every blessing, in response to a prayer of desperation, Tom Ryberg became my colleague in ministry. We are now both Associate Pastors at First Congregational Church of Battle Creek. The good and generous people of First Congregational worked tirelessly to raise the money to bring him on staff and he is blessing them backwards and forwards—believe you me. Talk about recognition. Those folks in Battle Creek didn't let a good thing pass them by. Not a day has gone by since that evening in June when I haven't thanked God for answering my prayer in this person, this prophet, this pastor. Glory, hallelujah.**

**You'll remember Tom that our beloved mentor, colleague and senior pastor Rev. Ott preached on Wednesday night about authority. And in that sermon he talked about the importance of the**

**ordination candidate's consistency with a 2000 year tradition that predates and shapes him or her. If you want to get ordained here, there's got to be something about you that gets recognized here (bible). And so when you asked me to preach on Jonah, I searched for you in this text. You weren't hard to find, my dear.**

**There is a formula in the second and third chapters of Jonah that I would like to lay out simply for everyone.**

**Songs of deliverance, God's deliverance, communal deliverance.**

**Say it with me: songs of deliverance, God's deliverance, communal deliverance.**

**Lots of folk think that human prayers or human songs are just for humans, that we sing and pray in order to rejuvenate ourselves on a Sunday morning. But this text and the Exodus narratives testify to something different. It is only when Jonah sings about God's deliverance that God's deliverance actually happens. It's only when the Exodus people cry out to God in the bondage of slavery that God raises up Moses to lead them out. Singing out, crying out moves God and not only in an emotional way; songs and prayers move God to act in the way of liberation and deliverance in the world, concretely. That deliverance isn't an individual thing, though it may start out that way as it did with Jonah. Jonah didn't just get spit up on dry land and go home thanking God for his rescue. He went straight to Ninevah and preached the word that saved them. God's deliverance is communal.**

**And that process, that formula of deliverance and liberation starts with the practice of faith. In Jonah's case and I suspect in your case too Tom,**

**deliverance begins in the willingness to practice faith through the act of making music. He and you place enough faith in God's ability to deliver that you make music to get that liberation motion going. It starts with Jonah; it starts with you. But it doesn't end there; God's deliverance is communal.**

**Let's take Jonah as our biblical case study this afternoon to learn about the spirit and practice of this faith that leads to deliverance.**

**Jonah is in a dark place, swallowed up, alone and cold. Captured and caught up in his own refusal to do the work he's been commissioned to do by YHWH. The belly of the whale is a metaphor, one that's had incredible resonance throughout history. It is the dark night of the soul. It is the isolation of the addict, the cage of prisoners, the den of depression for those in oppressive conditions. It is the antithesis of liberation; the belly of the whale is entrapment. It is the opposite of freedom; it is captivity. For the faint of heart, the belly of the whale is where despair meets death. For those who cannot remember life outside, the belly of the whale is where being swallowed up becomes the final word. For those who cannot hope in the future, the belly of the whale is where giving up happens. For the faint of heart, there's nothing to do in the belly of the whale but whither away and die.**

**But Jonah is not faint of heart. He is a reluctant, yet astoundingly resilient prophet. His first act of faith in the story happens right there in the most impossible place.**

**What moves Jonah to sing? What moves Jonah to practice a radical faith through music making? It is the same spirit that moved enslaved bodies from**

**West Africa to sing “steel away home” in the hush harbors of antebellum America. It is the same spirit that moved ghettoized Jews in the Czech Republic, in the concentration camp of Terezin to form symphonies and choirs in the midst of Hitler’s reign. It is the same spirit that moved surviving LGBTQ folk and families of deceased LGBTQ folk to stitch beautiful quilts when AIDS was killing my community off everyday in the 80’s and 90’s. It is a spirit that will not die. It is a spirit that escapes its own peril by enacting creativity as resistance. It is a spirit that makes beautiful no matter how ugly, how atrocious, how oppressive life can be. It is the spirit of survival that takes seriously that we are made in the image of God and any reflection of that God coming into the world depends on our willingness to be creative and to call it good.**

**You are not just a musician, Tom. You are one who recognizes suffering. You recognize injustice. And somewhere along the way—thank you Jesus—you did not fall into the trap so many of our brethren fall into. You did not allow yourself to be trained out of this recognition. You see and feel the pain of women living under systems of sexism. You see and feel the pain of people of color living in the conditions of white privilege. You see and feel the pain of LGBTQ people living with the yoke of homophobia. You see and feel the pain of the belly of the whale. So when we talk today about recognizing you for ministry, one of the things we recognize about you is your ability to recognize what is hurting, broken and full of despair—even when that recognition implicates you. This places you in a long line of prophets. In this recognition of suffering you stand with Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Jesus, Sojourner Truth, Oscar Romero and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. We recognize your placement in that prophetic line. Today we say it’s time to**

**stand and deliver.**

**While recognition of suffering is important, and we recognize that's an important part of your prophetic ministry, there are a whole host of academics, journalists and social commentators who can recognize suffering too. But not everyone can make the music of deliverance like you do. What we recognize beyond your ability to recognize suffering is that spirit of resilience and resistance in you, that spirit that enacts creative beauty in the radical practice of faith. It is in your music. You make melodies and play underneath people in a way that enacts the singing of deliverance. You can do that. You can do that in ways I've never seen in anyone else. You are uniquely equipped to create melodies that enable people to sing their way into deliverance and you must do that. Our world needs you to do that. God needs you to do that. Today we say it's time to stand and deliver.**

**You must create the melodies of deliverance in the belly of the whale, in Michigan, our home state where folks are suffering from the binding of unemployment and large scale poverty. Let them sing, Rev. Tom Ryberg.**

**You must create the melodies of deliverance in the belly of the whale, in our denomination where notions of diversity still remain token and theoretical instead of incarnate and vital. Let them sing, Rev. Tom Ryberg.**

**You must create the melodies of deliverance in the belly of the whale, in your family where fears of not being able to balance your love of Andria and your love of the church overwhelm. Let yourselves sing together, Mr. & Mrs. Ryberg.**