

“The Interview”
The Reverend Michael L. Delk
St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
II Advent – 3 & 4 December 2016
Matthew 3:1-12

John, welcome back. On behalf of the entire Commission on Ministry, we’re glad to see you again. We’ve enjoyed our stimulating conversations over the past several months, and we look forward to another lively discussion today. We appreciate the time and hard work you’ve put into this process of discernment and reflection, as we seek to understand together whether you going to seminary and eventually becoming a priest in The Episcopal Church is best for everybody. You are . . . a really unique person, and getting to know you has been a, uh . . . fascinating experience for everyone gathered here.

Why don’t we begin by catching up on what’s been happening with you. How’s life on the River? [PAUSE] Not as many visitors as usual? Well, I’m sorry to hear it, John, but we’ve talked about that and tried to explain how people don’t like to be yelled at, no matter how good your intentions may be. [PAUSE]

John. John, we’ve gone over this before. When you harshly criticize people like that and make dire warnings, it sort of turns people off. We all know that nowadays folks expect a softer, more user-friendly type of religion, and you’re not meeting their expectations. I’m sure you’re disappointed by what’s happening. [PAUSE] John, you’re starting to get a little over-excited, so let’s just try to focus on the matter at hand.

You’ve shared your thoughts and feelings with us in a refreshingly candid way, and we’re grateful that you showed the same honesty and openness with the diocesan psychiatrist. We know how intimidating this part of the process can be for every candidate hoping to become a priest, and we hope that it was an enlightening experience for you that can yield insights into . .

. [PAUSE] Yes, the doctor's therapy seems to be going very well. It's very kind of you to ask.

[PAUSE] No, he doesn't blame you, John.

Anyway, there aren't any real surprises in the psychiatric report. Lots of praise here from the good doctor, says you're highly intelligent, very articulate, passionate devotion to your work, with a deep sense of moral integrity and humility. He was especially impressed your remark, which you've also shared with us, that you don't feel worthy to untie the thongs of Jesus' sandals. Rather colorful language, but we all treasure that about you.

However, he has some concerns, and that's perfectly natural. In fact, this is some stuff we've gone over in our previous meetings with you. The doctor agrees with us that you need to practice better anger management. [PAUSE] John, just let me finish. [PAUSE] John, you're being defensive about this, and that's not helpful. [PAUSE] Yes, I know that there's a lot to be righteously angry about in the world, but this outburst is just proving the point everybody's been making that you need to reign in that anger. You'll get a chance to respond once we've reviewed the whole report.

Next up, nothing new here, there's a concern that you struggle with an impulse control issue. You just fly off the handle at the slightest provocation, and we're really worried that someday you're just going to lose your head over it. Now there's nothing wrong with you being you, John. I really mean that. But we need to channel some of your zeal into a kinder, gentler version that's more suitable to serving as a priest. [PAUSE]

I couldn't agree with you more, John. We need to speak the truth, but the truth in love. [PAUSE] Yes, there's a place for tough love in the Church. [PAUSE] You're right, John, sometimes we do lack a sense of urgency and intensity when it comes to preparing for the arrival of Jesus, but we've already covered this ground. People are busy. It's hard to cut through the

clutter. We can influence, encourage, and persuade people to put God first in their lives, but there are limits to what can be done.

We're not in a position to make demands. [PAUSE] I know you do. I know you do, but John you told me earlier that the River's been a little lonely here lately, and why do you think that is? Frankly, John, that's one of our chief concerns about you entering seminary and becoming a priest. Being plain-spoken is fine, but whether you wind up in a parish or as a missionary, we're worried that you'll scare people off. I can see you shrinking a congregation by 80% in your first year. We're here to bring people in, not drive them away. [PAUSE]

Yes, the faithful remnant, John, you're right, but we need to meet people halfway, and that brings us to another one of our concerns. You're not meeting people halfway. You expect them to trudge out into the wilderness to the River, and you have to understand how inconvenient that is. The wilderness can be a very risky, scary place. [PAUSE] Look, we know the Bible, too. We know about the Israelites wandering in the wilderness for forty years. We know about Jesus spending forty days and night out there in the wild, and we're not denying the necessity . . . [PAUSE] John, you need to be more realistic about this, OK? Let's move on.

The violent imagery you use is very disconcerting. For instance, this talk about trees that don't bear fruit being cut down by the root and thrown into the fire, and the metaphor of the wheat and the chafe, with the chafe going into the fire, there's a lot of judgement in those words, John, and you need to realize that it's not really your place . . . [PAUSE] People do need to take sin seriously. [PAUSE] We don't need to argue about this. People need to know about God's wrath, about God's justice, and that wrath goes hand in hand with redemption. [PAUSE] No, we don't emphasize it very much, for reasons I've already mentioned. If you want to be a priest,

John, you have to balance your sense of prophetic mission with the delicate pastoral work that comes . . . [PAUSE]

I don't think calling people names is going to do anybody any good. How would you like it if I called you a son-of-a-snake? That's more insulting than being called a son-of-a . . .

[PAUSE] John, you're being incredibly rude and disrespectful right now. Your hostility toward people in authority . . . [PAUSE] No, we are not pawns of the status quo. You have an irrational, radical agenda that will not work . . . [PAUSE] John, please calm down. [PAUSE]

Listen, John. We're on the same page here. You just need to dial it down several notches. We all seek transformation. We all strive to commit heart, body, and soul to God. We all want to repent and turn from darkness to light and be ready for when Jesus comes, but your views are extreme and troubling and . . . [PAUSE]

OK, John, that's enough. I'm sorry, but our time's up. If you'll step out for a few minutes, we'll prayerfully consider your future in terms of going to seminary and serving the Church as a member of the clergy. We'll bring you back in shortly, and let you know where we are. Thank you, John. We appreciate your time.

Well, friends I think we can all agree that John is a wonderfully robust, flamboyant, charismatic person with plenty of gifts for ministry, but placing him in any position of leadership in the Church is simply too dangerous. His revolutionary views will complicate perhaps even devastate church growth and development opportunities wherever he might be called, if anyone bothers to call him. And what's worse, his revolutionary ideas about radical change might take hold among some people, which would cause havoc. John has many admirable qualities, but his potential is more likely to harm than to help. So unless there's any dissent, I'll recommend that

we reject John's application, and we'll just let him go back to his River in the wilderness and do his thing, while the Church does its thing. Let's take a break. Amen.