

BE PROPHETIC

Ordination of Deacons, Cathedral of St. John the Divine
May 14, 2005

Jeremiah 1:4-9

Acts 6:2-7

Luke 22:24-27

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Send our your light and your truth, that they may lead me, and bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling.

“Robert, you’re exasperating.”

These are the words that I heard from my father more than once when I was growing-up. He told me that I asked too many questions.

Those of us who grew-up during the 1960s and 1970s, grew-up with the TV news; with people like Huntley and Brinkley, Walter Cronkite, and Eric Severeid. They were all virtual members of my family.

What dominated the news during those days was the Vietnam War. This would be the living room war, a war that came into your house on a daily basis; based not just on newspaper articles, but on moving pictures. Night after night I witnessed the fighting, the suffering, the loneliness, the desperateness, and most of all, the carnage and the dying. I could not help but wonder how these soldiers felt.

I could not help but wonder what they needed when they were thousands of miles away from their homes, their families, their wives, and their children. I kept asking myself how were they comforted and what gave them the strength to carry on.

In the face of all this horror, I had to ask the question “why?” And again, I asked the question, and still again asked the question, but the right answer never came. No matter how often I asked the question, or how often I changed the recipient of my question, the right answer never came.

In 1974, I surprised all of my friends when I enlisted in Navy ROTC as I entered my freshman year at Tulane University. My friends could not understand how someone so involved in the arts as I was – after all, I was a violinist, a singer and an actor – would have an interest in joining the military.

My friends could not understand that I just wanted to serve a country that I loved so dearly; and I thought that in the military, I might be able to make things right. In that all too often used phrase, I wanted “to make a difference.”

And yet, when it came time for me to serve more deeply the church that I love so much, none of my friends were surprised at all.

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The deacon in the 21st century faces significant challenges. The church and world structure during the early church created a diaconal ministry that was easy to put one’s arms around. As the church was adopted by the Holy Roman Empire – an amalgamation of both church and state – the deacons became more and more administrators of the social services of the government. During the Roman imperial period, it was the custom for local government officials to be in Holy Orders, and so the local imperial rulers, the chancellors and the magistrates were often in deacon’s orders. St. Patrick’s father, Calpornius was one such official during the late Roman imperial government of Britain.

In the 21st Century, some 1,600 years after the time of Deacon Calpornius, the deacon faces a new challenge to find an identify that is consistent with the ancient church, and yet, mindful of the times in which we live.

As members of the sacred order of deacons, we struggle to identify our ministry in a world that has only just rediscovered it. We tend to forget that this is a ministry that up to about 35 years ago was virtually extinct.

We no longer have the great church treasuries to administer for social purposes. Widows, orphans and the poor are taken care of largely by some form of governmental administration.

Logic dictates that with these welfare functions being taken over by federal and state governments, we would see less and less deacons being called.

And yet, in spite of this shifting of responsibility from the Church to State, God has called more and more deacons to a new kind of life of service to the church.

We just have to figure out why.

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Our struggle to rediscover our ancient ministry stems in large part to our human need to put things in neat boxes. But in many ways, diaconal ministry defies organization. There is no one type of ministry that belongs to the deacon.

Diakonia, from which the English word deacon is derived, actually has some very general meanings.

According to Thayer's Greek Lexicon, diakonia can mean:

- “of the ministration or service of all who, endowed by God with powers of mind and heart peculiarly adapted to this end, endeavor zealously and laboriously to promote the cause of Christ among people;”
- “of the office of the apostles and its administration;”
- “the ministration of those who render to others the offices of Christian affection, especially of those who succor need by either collecting or bestowing benefactions;”
- “the care of the poor, the supplying or distributing charities, the service of those who prepare and present food.”

If anything can be gleaned from these descriptions, it is that a deacon's ministry is broad-based. Any one-size-fits-all analysis of what a deacon is, or is not, must ring hollow.

Deacons are called to soup kitchens and other feeding ministries, homeless shelters and other outreach ministries, nursing and hospice and a variety of diocesan and administrative positions. A deacon is both minister and administer.

And while each deacon's ministry is different, we have one thing very profoundly in common, and that is our hearts.

To understand the deacon's heart is to understand the cross. Our being is centered in Christology, both beginning and ending with the Christ that hung on a tree as the first and only obedient servant of the world who could and would follow the command of the Creator, even unto gruesome death.

This great service, this perfect service and sacrifice, is not only the source of our justification with the creator, but the source of our gratefulness to he who has served so well. This service, in turn, provides the model and inspiration for our service to the church and to the world.

Rowan Williams, in his book *Anglican Identities*, summarizes the nature of Christ's service, by writing: "God's service to us in Christ is both the model and the motive force for our relation to our neighbour, a 'free, eager, and glad life of serving . . . without reward'. The heart of the argument is that Christ does not perform his works of love towards us in order to achieve something: he is already divine, already in the bliss of the Godhead. His works are the outflowing of what he is."

Those who have been called to service, find it difficult to explain why. If we are justified by our faith, we do not serve for salvation purposes. We certainly do not do it to make a living, as deacons are not paid for their ministry. This is a ministry with only spiritual rewards, and for this reason, it is a ministry that is most closely associated with the Christ. In today's Gospel, the Christ makes clear that he came to us not to be served, but to serve.

We serve because it is our nature, it is what we are, it is an outpouring of ourselves. This is something that was inscribed on our hearts from before we were born.

In the words of today's Old Testament reading, our Creator has known us from the beginning; we were consecrated in the womb.

The deacon's heart is a grateful heart, a heart that knows and feels the great gift of the perfect servant, the Christ. And while deacons have many different temporal gifts for the church and the world, it is this grateful heart, the deacon's heart, that is the tie that binds us so closely together in our sacred order.

Robin, Eliza, George and Thomas Mark, God has called you, not because of anything you have done in your lives, but because of your faith, because of your hearts. Your ordination is merely a confirmation of what the Creator has known already.

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In the 21st century, the deacon does not have the administrative clout and wealthy treasuries that were once the cachet of our deacon ancestors.

But we still have a heart of compassion. It is with this heart, that we can lead the people.

In today's Old Testament reading, the prophet Jeremiah points us to where our ministry may lead us. We can be prophetic. In the reading, God speaks to Jeremiah and says: "I appointed you a prophet to the nations."

Indeed, we can be more prophetic.

In St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians, he tells us that the church is to "built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets." We have the apostles, our bishops and our priests. Perhaps what the church needs more of are deacon-prophets.

The word "prophet" is problematic in today's day and age. People think that prophets, like the Christ and like the resurrection, are something that happened long ago. The word prophet cannot help but conjure up visions of someone wearing camel's hair and feasting on locusts and honey. Or worse yet, someone brandishing a bible in Times Square who promises us that the end of the world is very, very near, as in tomorrow.

But the word prophet is broader than that. A prophet is also be someone who is gifted with a spiritual or moral insight – an effective spokesperson for a cause, doctrine or a group.

If deacons are to be prophetic, if we are to be spokespersons for the people, or for particular groups of people, especially the suffering and the disenfranchised, this means having to be in the world – to feel the pain and the suffering of those in the world, just as the Christ humbled himself to be in the world to feel our pain and suffering.

As ministers in the world, we are sent by our Bishops so that God's holy people can see and feel and touch and know the resurrected presence of Christ here on earth in the form of his Holy Church. We are sent so that the people may know and be comforted by Christ's ever living and ever loving presence, here and now in the world; here, now and always.

We have the daunting task of bearing the goodness of God to all people.

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One of the great joys of my ministry is to visit parishioners in their homes. This is a ministry that I share with my wife Dana, who often accompanies me on these visits. I bring communion, I bring food and I bring my questions.

I haven't seen a shut-in who, when first asked, hasn't told me that everything was just fine. But I know that that is never the right answer. When I ask the question again and again still, I start to hear how the insurance company has declined coverage, how the aide doesn't want to do the job, but only wants to watch TV, and I learn about the difficulties of boarding a bus in a wheel chair. All of this happens in the intimacy of the person's home – in the world.

What we see and what we hear in the world is invaluable to the church in its sacred ministry to the people. We in the church are so skilled at doing the talking, at putting-out our rules, our terms, that we forget how to meet people on their terms and to listen to what they are trying to tell us. By being the greater eyes and ears of our Bishops, we can help them better minister to the needs of the world.

The deacon's ministry is a watchful ministry. We need to see how things work in the world, to advocate for a healing of those things that are broken, and, as healers, to heal that which is broken.

If we are to be advocates, if we are to be prophetic, we have to ask the larger questions to the church and to the world. We need to find out why it is so difficult for the elderly, for the sick and for the disenfranchised.

We have to ask what the people need to be better evangelized, in the same way that St. Stephen was an evangelizer. St. Stephen was the first deacon to be called and we learn a bit about his calling from today's Epistle. Ultimately, St. Stephen takes a position against the ruling Temple cult. Having threatened the ruling Temple cult, St. Stephen was stoned to death. St. Stephen asked too many questions. St. Stephen was exasperating.

Like St. Stephen, we need the courage to continue to ask the hard questions until we find the right answers.

Robin, Eliza, George and Thomas Mark, you are about to embark upon your diaconal ministry. You each have gifts that are traditionally diaconal.

Robin, as a visiting nurse, you are truly in the world and uniquely positioned to ask the hard questions for those who are ill and who particularly need the church.

Eliza you are involved with the elderly. You too are uniquely positioned to ask the hard questions about eldercare.

George, you are involved with anti-racism. You are uniquely positioned to ask the hard questions about our race relations and what the church can do about it.

Thomas Mark, your work in a hospice makes you particularly able to ask the questions about how we care for the dying and how the church can help.

Because of your unique positions in the world, you each have a great opportunity to ask the tough questions about the needs of the sick, the elderly, the dying and the disenfranchised – what they are looking for from the church, what we as a church can do to minister to them – to comfort their suffering and to offer them companionship, in the same way that the resurrected Christ is companion to all who are open to receiving him.

Make a difference: minister to the people, live your ministry, love your ministry, as the Christ loved all people, and above all, let's be prophetic.