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St. John's Cathedral
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Diaconal Ordinations
Jeremiah 1:1-4
2 Corinthians 4:1-6
Luke 22:24-27

Homily on the Ordination to the Diaconate, June 6, 2009
The Rev. Dayle Casey

As we all know, the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing. And the main thing, as St. Paul reminds us, is that we have nothing to offer except what we have first received, which is Jesus Christ, crucified and raised.

That's why the Prayer Book appoints a Maundy Thursday reading for your ordination. Because your ordination today, together with your baptism, is the main ordination of your life, your commissioning into the ministry of Christ, servant of the last, the least, and the lost.

On the night on which he washed his disciples' feet, the very night he was preparing to die for us, Our Lord said, "Let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. For which is greater, one who sits at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who sits at table? But I am among you as one who serves."

In this Upper Room charge to his disciples, Jesus sums up both his mission to the world and the essence of the life of the Church. It is therefore significant, for what we are doing today, that a literal translation of the Greek at this point would be, "Let the leader among you become as one who is the deacon, for I am among you as one who is the deacon," and, as he adds in another, similar context, "as one who gives his life as a ransom for many."

Being one who serves at table, being a deacon, in other words, is the essence of the life of the Church, the thing we are to keep the main thing.

Now I don't know how it was at your seminaries, but at my seminary, eons ago, it was a popular extracurricular activity to peruse the Almy and Wipple's catalogs to check out the different shades of purple. There were some, of course, who didn't dream of becoming bishops, but who rather fancied themselves as prophets like Jeremiah or Ezekiel. For them, there were no catalogs to study.

But in that regard, I recall the story a friend told me about the time when he was sitting where you are sitting today, about how his bishop told him that he would be going to his home parish to serve as curate, and about how that didn't fit my friend's image of what he thought he was prepared to do. So he said to his bishop, "But, Right Reverend Sir, don't you remember how Jesus warned that a prophet is not without honor, except in his own home town?" But his bishop told him, "Well, Walter, whether you are a prophet or not remains to be seen. But, right now, I *know* you're a deacon. And if you're going to be a prophet, you need to do it the way Ezekiel and Jeremiah did it. You need to sit with the people awhile. So that's where you're going."

We often think of ordained ministry, whether as deacon or priest or bishop, in terms of service to others. And we should. The word "deacon" means, among other things, "doing for others." But one has to prepare for that by sitting where the others sit.

Consider the experience of Ezekiel when God called him to be his prophet. Ezekiel felt the call of God upon him, and the Lord spoke to Ezekiel and said, "Ezekiel, I am sending you to the Israelites to bear my word to them. But first, you must take this Scroll and eat it; you yourself must *consume* my Word." And Ezekiel said, "OK." And he did it. But Ezekiel wasn't yet ready to serve. He had consumed the Word, but he needed time to digest it. So the Lord said, "I'm not sending you to serve in the Temple, because my word has already been given to them there, and they have not listened," for they and their fathers have been in revolt against me to this very day. No, I am sending you out there – to Babylon, to those in exile, to those who are suffering because of their rebelliousness. And you are to speak my Word to them whether they listen or do not listen, for they are a rebellious house. So go now to your countrymen in exile."

"Then the Spirit lifted me up and took me away," Ezekiel tells us, "and I went in bitterness and in the anger of my spirit, with the strong hand of the Lord upon me. I came to the exiles who lived at Tel Abib near the River Kebar. And there, where they were living, I sat among them for seven days – overwhelmed." And *there*, among the exiles, in order to prepare for the service he was called to give, Ezekiel lay on his side for 390 days, bearing the sin of the people and digesting the Word he had eaten, as the Lord commanded him to do.

Eating the Scroll was not the *end* of Ezekiel's preparation, it was only the beginning. Seminary was not the end of your preparation, but only the beginning. Before Ezekiel could begin to serve, he had to sit where the people sat, bearing their sin. This, I suggest, is the *reality* of diaconal ministry, of which the stole and the deacon's towel are but outward and visible signs, a reality that insists that it means little if we prepare God's table in the church, unless first we "sit where they sit" on East Colfax and South Nevada, and also prepare God's table out there.

Here's a parable. It's a true story, factual, but a parable all the same. It's Becky Pippert's story about how she met a student named Bill at the college where she was part of a campus ministry. Becky had met Bill at one of the campus coffee shops, and for months she had invited him to be part of the worship and fellowship of her Presbyterian church down the street. And one Sunday morning, after months of reluctance, Bill came.

Bill, she says, was one of the weird ones on campus. Estranged from both his family and the world he grew up in, Bill lived outside fashionable circles, a lost soul, uncertain of himself. Becky was sure, she says, that Bill had worn the same pair of blue jeans every day since she first met him. She imagined that they had never been washed and that if he actually took them off at night, they would probably stand by themselves. His tee shirts carried all sorts of politically charged messages, along with various bangles and beads and odds and ends hanging from their hems. You could never mistake Bill for someone else. If nothing else, Bill could be easily identified by his hair, which was blue and long on one side and orange and short on the other. And just so was Bill adorned on that Sunday morning when he came to church. Becky didn't know that Bill was coming that day. She says that she imagined that Bill had simply awakened that morning and said to himself, "Hmm, cool! It's Sunday. Becky says that Christians worship Jesus on Sundays. I think I'll go to church today and see what it's all about."

When Bill arrived, Becky was already in church, sitting near the back. It was a most proper church, Becky says, a fashionable church. And we know what that means, because there is no church more proper and fashionable than a proper Presbyterian church. Unless it's a proper Episcopal church.

Well, Bill was late when he arrived, and the church was packed. And there weren't any seats left in the back pews. As it turned out, there weren't any empty seats in *any* pew.

The pastor was just about to begin his sermon as Bill began a slow stroll down the aisle, and a deep hush fell over the congregation. Not out of anticipation of the pastor's sermon, but in astonishment at Bill, because he was taking his time, pausing to peer into each pew along the way to see if there was a place for him in church. And there wasn't. The pastor was watching, everyone was watching, for what seemed an eternity.

Then people became aware that one of the ushers, a deacon of the church, was making *his* way down the aisle behind Bill. He was one of the 'pillars' of the church, an elderly retired banker wearing the three-piece suit customary in both his business and his church. Because of arthritis, he walked with difficulty, but he was most decidedly and steadily making his way behind Bill.

Bill continued on alone, with everyone staring at him, until he reached the front. Finally, finding no welcome in a pew, he sat down on the floor, right in front of the altar, sprawling on the carpet and staring up at the pastor, jeans and tee shirt and hair and all.

And Becky confesses that all the while she was thinking to herself, "Oh, my! Well, you really can't blame the usher for what he's about to do. He and Bill live in such different worlds. He doesn't know Bill from the streets and coffee shops as I do; he and Bill share almost nothing in common. After all, here in church it's his job to seat people decently and in order. He can't be blamed for being upset. Anyone can understand what he's about to do."

And the silence deepened as the elderly man continued his way down the aisle, finally reaching Bill. And then, painfully and slowly he lowered his arthritic body to the floor and sat beside Bill.

Who, in that church that day, would you say loved Bill the way Jesus loves him?

"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort which we ourselves have received from God." This word from St. Paul contains, I think, a good summary of the fundamental charge one receives when ordained a deacon, because the Greek word that is translated into English here as "comfort" is *parakalein*. As a noun in English Bibles it is sometimes left untranslated and comes out as Paraclete. As a verb its literal meaning is "to be called along side of," or "to walk along side of."

So that Paul's charge might be rendered literally in this way: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all walking-besidedness, who walks beside us in all our troubles so that we can walk beside those in any trouble with the same walking-besidedness which we ourselves have received from God."

That is the main thing. We have nothing to offer but what we have first received, the Christ who walks beside us in our troubles so that we might walk beside others in their troubles with the same walking-besidedness which we ourselves have received from God, and just so bear one another's burdens.

"Doing for others," by itself, is not the main point of your ordination today, because human beings at our best, whether believers or not, will always "do for others." Often, in fact, those outside the Church can "do for others" better than we can.

The main point of your ordination today is that, through the entire Maundy Thursday event – indeed, throughout his entire life – Jesus casts deaconing against a much larger background. He casts it against the shadow of the Cross. And so, leaving the Upper Room where he serves at table and washes his disciples’ feet, Jesus ascends the altar of sacrifice. He climbs the hill of Calvary.

Jesus’ serving at table and washing his disciples’ feet are not simply humanitarian acts of hospitality; they are a rehearsal of the Crucifixion, a reversal of reality – a reversal of weakness and power, a reversal of falsehood and truth, of absurdity and meaning, of death and life. Only God can send his only Son to be the Deacon to the world, not only by “doing for others,” but by giving his life as a ransom for many, not by “doing for the world” like some divine welfare program, but by being the agent of God’s victory over sin and death. This is the reversal of reality into which you are being ordained today.

Do you recall why Mary Magdalene was the first among the apostles, indeed the apostle to the apostles? It was because she was the first among the deacons. It was because she was *there*, both outside the camp at the refuse hill of Calvary and at the empty tomb. Mary was the first to see the risen Lord, because, when death came calling, instead of going into hiding, she loved her Friend enough to do for him what was needed, to walk beside his cold and broken body, to anoint it for burial. And that’s when her risen Lord called her by name. “Mary,” he said. Go and tell the others I want to see them again.”

Sally, Dana, and Bruce, this, finally, is the deaconing ministry to which you have been called. First, sit with Bill. “Do not neglect to welcome strangers, for by so doing some have entertained angels unawares. Remember those in prison, as if you were their fellow prisoners and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.” *Then* proclaim the Gospel and prepare the table. Beyond “doing for others,” you are to serve as witnesses of the Cross and of God’s victory over death. This is why you are being given a Bible and being vested with a stole today. Only a deaconing Church can vest you with the tools you will need to proclaim the Gospel, to prepare and distribute the offerings of Christ’s sacrifice as a ransom for many, and to “do for others” acts of service in such ways that you are living signs to all of us of the way God does love in his world.

It is significant that our chief pastor, who will lay hands on you today, is himself a deacon. Regardless of whatever other office you may be called to some day, whether that of priest or bishop or prophet, do not be fooled by the demotion. You will remain, first of all, deacons within a deaconing Church. That’s the main thing. Keep it the main thing. Is this not what St. Paul has in mind when he reminds us that the apostles, deacons to a man, were fools for Christ whom “God has put on display at the end of the procession, like men condemned to die.”

Regardless of office, it will always be your vocation to “sit where they sit,” to come to know your people in their exile, from runny noses to terminal illnesses, from times of honor or joy to times of loneliness or grief, to rejoice with them when they rejoice and to weep with them when they weep, to love them as Jesus loves them. Not to parade your own agendas as prophecy or truth – the Church has enough of that already! – but to model the Incarnation.

It will be your task, not so much to call them to do their best, but to walk with them toward the Maundy Thursday and Paschal faith, to walk with them from exile to home, from Babylon to Jerusalem, from despair to hope, from absurdity to meaning, from estrangement to reconciliation, from sorrow to joy, from death to life. It will be your task to live and serve among them in such ways that they will see you as a sign that God loves the world so much, that he sent his only Son as the Deacon to the world, as the One who gave his life as a ransom for many, not to condemn the world, but to save it.

In the Name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.