

Sermon on Receiving Distinguished Alumni Award from the General Seminary

By Geri Swanson

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John 14:1-6 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. ⁴ And you know the way to the place where I am going.” Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

We all have heard the old joke:

“One day a man dies, who was a devout Christian. Saint Peter meets him at the Pearly Gates and begins to give him a tour of Heaven. As the tour goes on, Saint Peter points out all the different Christians. "There's the Baptists, there's the Lutherans, the Methodists, the Presbyterians", and so forth. As they come to this one group way off to themselves, Saint Peter motions for the man to come closer and whispers. "Now, for this next group, we need to be really quiet. They are the Catholics and they think they're the only ones in Heaven."

Well, for a part of my life I actually thought that was true. I was born into a devout Roman Catholic family in post-World War II New York City. My father was a veteran of the war who survived with shrapnel in his legs and head causing him to lose 60% of his hearing in his right ear. He also suffered from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. When he lay wounded in the forest of Belgium during the Battle of the Bulge he vowed that if he survived he would return steadfastly to his faith, and he prayed for survival. He kept that promise, my Father was at Mass every Sunday and reveled in the smell of incense. He told me as I complained of the smoke from the incense that caused my child’s eyes to burn, that I needed to get used to it because, “That is how heaven smells”.

My mother was also a pillar of the Church. She followed its rituals very closely; she had a special devotion to the Virgin Mary. She had six pregnancies and delivered five healthy children, and after each birth, she would return into the congregation only after undergoing the old tradition of “The Churching of Women”, the ceremonial blessing given to mothers after recovery from childbirth. I remember going with her twice after the birth of my youngest siblings for her to be blessed and then be again welcomed back into the congregation. Mom belonged to the Legion of Mary and the Rosary Society. We prayed the rosary together as a family many times.

In 1960, after the election of John Kennedy, I thought I was the luckiest kid in the world; I had hit the trifecta: I was Irish-American, I lived in New York City and I was a Roman Catholic. What could be better?

But soon I began to wonder about the fate of those who were not as lucky as I was, who were not Catholic. What would happen to their eternal souls after they died? On the same floor that we lived on in a five story walk up apartment building in the Bronx, there were three neighbors that had an impact on my life as a young child. Marie Deenihan who lived next to us with her husband, became a grandmother figure for us kids. She was a wonderful woman, but she was a Lutheran. Then there was Mrs. Shapiro, a Russian Jewish woman who made us chicken soup every Friday because my father was her “Shabbos Goy”, he would flick off the lights, turn on the stove and lock the door when he left. And Mrs. Bruns was

a Holocaust survivor from Belgium who lived quietly but made great cookies that she shared with us since she had no grandchildren of her own; they all perished in the war. These women were all women of faith, just not my faith. And my church, at that time, did not hold out much hope for their salvation. How could this be?

But it was not just religion that saw my hometown divided, during the 50's and 60's in New York City, race was a major divider of people. In 1960 my parents bought a house, and we moved to Brooklyn where my father worked. My parents, good Roman Catholics as they were, sent all five of their children to the local Catholic school. But in my case, it was not so local. Three of my siblings went to the local school, but my older sister and I were bussed into Bed-Sty to a Catholic School there whose enrollment was failing due to the change in the fortunes and racial make-up of its neighborhood. Many Brooklyn churches sent the overflow students from their parish to this complex located on Classon Avenue in Bed Sty. Now this was not the gentrified Bed Sty that you may know today with coffee bistros and millennials all over the place; this was the rough and tumble Bed Sty where you had best develop your street creds along with your school diploma, and I loved every minute of it! There were kids from mixed race families, kids from the Caribbean, refugees from Hungary, Cuba and Africa seeking political asylum and freedom. I learned to turn and jump double dutch, ate plantains, was introduced to the joys of Cuban black bean soup, and learned how to braid hair correctly. And I learned that all of God's children come in many sizes, shapes and colors and that I was blessed to understand that we collectively were all lucky to be together, and playing and praying together made us closer to what the kingdom of God really looked like. And it was there that I first heard a call to ministry.

My path to ordination became possible after I was received into the Episcopal Church. My husband was a good Scandinavian Lutheran, and we wanted to go to church together, so we decided to split the difference and try the Episcopal Church. And even though it was a hard pill for my parents to swallow, there was no looking back. And here I stand, ordained to the Diaconate 21 years ago in this, my home city and home diocese.

I understand that there are many places and spaces for all kinds of people of faith to dwell and grow spiritually. We all need these in order to find our way to the Almighty, and it is not "one size fits all" ...it has to be elastic, to stretch and bend so we all can find our way. We need to know that my way may not be your way, but we need to find a place that will allow us the resources and tools to do just that. This is one of those places.

I came to this place during my formation as a deacon in the diaconal formation program of the diocese of New York. We meet in Sherrod Hall several Saturdays a month to do the academic requirements for ordination. Four weeks were devoted to each canonical area, and we often had Seminary faculty members deliver lectures in their area of specialty. Now, I have to be honest here, several members of my cohort, names will not be revealed, were bored to tears with the lecture format, mostly because they had been far removed from their own school days; some of them had a hard time staying awake, but I found these lectures fascinating, I wanted to learn more. A few years after ordination I had a conversation with the then admission director, Toni Daniels, who told me the seminary would be offering a Master's program that might work for me as a non-traditional evening student. It was really meant for lay people, but I might be able to make it work for me, if I was willing to be flexible and take the first 12 credits as a non-matriculated student. I decided to do just that. But I am not sure the seminary was ready for me...someone already ordained to the diaconate who had no intention to go on to become a priest. I recall that one of the priest I asked for a recommendation, a double grad of GTS, had me promise that I would not be using this as a back door to the priesthood. I double promised. And so I began my eight-year journey that ended in the conferring of my MA in 2008.

But it wasn't all a bed of roses...more like the creeping ivy that covered so many of the buildings on this close. I was unlike both the day students studying for their Master's in Divinity and the other evening students who were lay leaders in their churches. Professors wondered if I had the "academic chops" to do graduate work...I already had one Master's degree under my belt. But I was neither fish nor fowl; I realized that I would have to create my own road to get the most out of this institution. I would have to find my own dwelling place on this campus, and take from it what I needed to further my own ministry, and in each course I took, I tried to experience it through a diaconal lens. I got great support from the diaconal community. The Association for Episcopal Deacons was always looking for things to put in their quarterly, "Diakonia", and would publish any articles I submitted to them based on the work I did here. I soon had a reputation as an "expert" in the field of diakonia, I was really just thinking out loud about it. That recognition in the diaconal community led to my serving two terms on their Board and currently sitting on the Board of the Fund for the Diaconate. Those things would not have happened if I did not decide to take a chance and study here designing my own dwelling place, my own spiritual room.

So, the work needs to go on. General Seminary can be a place, a space where spiritual curiosity and intellectual creativity offer new and interesting dwelling places for all kinds of growth for all kinds of people doing all kinds of ministry to and with the people of God, helping, forming and informing traditional and non-traditional servant leaders, lay and ordained, priests and deacons to knock on the doors of those dwelling places, those rooms where for too long , we have been isolated in our thinking and in our perceptions, and let The Spirit that fills us all, work in each of us to further the Kingdom that we all can inherit.

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