

A Sermon by Deacon Geof Smith  
At the Ordination of Maryan Davis and Johanna Young  
June 12, 2016 Diocese of New Hampshire

First of all, let me just say how deeply humbled I am to be here before you today. It is not often that a deacon gets to preach before their bishop, so many colleagues, and to this many people. And Maryan, Johanna: I am *so* excited for you!

You are about to embark on an incredible voyage. It's just that, well . . . when I saw the invitation you sent out, and the color of the stoles for clergy, it got me thinking about the fact that . . .

On Exo III, Security Officers Matthews and Rayburn died at the hands of Ruk.

On Cestus III, Ensign O'Herlihy was vaporized by a Gorm weapon.

And a week later, on Janus IV, another unnamed crewman was killed by the Horta.

What ties these tragic events together is that each of these four crew members of the starship Enterprise died while wearing red shirts. By the end of the next season, that number had grown to twenty. And it only got worse. By the time Star Trek had run through all the generations, a staggering 73% of all crew member deaths were to those wearing red shirts. Many of these – tragically – died before the first cut to commercial. In fact, as a plot device, this outcome was so predictable that today being a “redshirt” is cliché for, “You're expendable.”

I only say this, Maryan, and Johanna, because in a few minutes, you too will be vested in red.

As Sulu might say, “Oh my!” Welcome to the landing party!

For I promise you, there are going to be times when as a newly-ordained deacon, you are going to feel like you are the red-shirted crewmember in a Star Trek episode: happy to be along, but perhaps not really all that sure even now you know what you're getting yourself into. So the question you must ask yourselves is: where are you expendable?

As a deacon of the Church, you are charged with assisting the bishop and priests in public worship and in the ministration of God's Word and Sacraments, and that includes setting the Holy Table for the Eucharist. Seems simple enough, but did I place the ribbons in the Altar Book on the right pages? Did I set out enough bread and wine to be consecrated, without over-doing it and incurring the wrath of the altar guild? When I'm standing next to the Presider at the Eucharist, how close is too close before I get smacked in the face when they spread their hands?

These questions may seem important in the moment, but relax: no one has yet been killed off because they put the bread to be consecrated to the right of the chalice instead of the left.

This will not be what makes you an expendable.

As a deacon of the Church, you are to study the Holy Scriptures, to seek nourishment from them, and to model your life upon them. What they may not have told in deacon's school is that by virtue of being the deacon, you'll preach with an alarming frequency on some rather choice Sundays: on low Sundays and holiday weekends, and Trinity Sunday, to expound on the interplay of the Persons of the Trinity and the interpenetration of modality. Which sounds really weird, until you remember it means that God loves you too – even if you don't have a PhD in systematic theology.

So again I say relax: no deacon has ever been vaporized for saying at coffee hour, “Gee, I don't know; let me look that up and get back to you.”

This too will not be what makes you an expendable.

As a deacon of the Church, you are to interpret to the Church the needs, concerns and hopes of the world. Oh well now, this might someday get you in a bit of a pickle.

For consider what we just heard from Acts, where the disciples and the community choose Stephen and six others to wait on tables. This is such a wonderful choice of readings for a deacon's ordination, but as Bishop Tom Breidenthal of Southern Ohio points out, this passage begins with a

church going off-course; with a need for deacons to embody that hope-filled possibility that we as a church may both hold to our ideals, and be self-critical at the same time.

Here's what I mean: Stephen and his companions are chosen to oversee the daily distribution of food so that the apostles can continue their ministry of telling the stories of Jesus. But before doing this, the church has to first admit it is failing in a way: the widows of Gentile members are being ignored in the daily meal service. We aren't treating all our members with the radical hospitality promised in baptism.

It seems the church cannot, by itself, overcome the deep-seated sense of privilege held by some of its members. Jesus' prayer that we be in the world but not of it can be challenging at the very least. And so for the first time, the church has to make a course-correction to hold itself true to the gospel. It begins ordaining crew members to point us back to our mission. For Stephen and others chosen since, holding up the poor and forgotten will be a deeply fulfilling mission, at least until the end of the next chapter, when Stephen becomes the church's first martyr. You see, by daring to disrupt the status quo and preach the Gospel truth, Stephen became an expendable.

And that pull towards being comfortable in privilege isn't just a story from long, long ago, is it? As a church, we are still trying to live into the Gospel; and still sometimes falling short. It's no wonder really: we live in a world today that makes a sport of taking those who make us uncomfortable and making them – and the people who stand with them - expendable. Like when:

- We want our kids to have cello lessons and field hockey and summer camps even if their classmates from the other side of town can't afford them. Sure the opportunity gap that exists between children growing up in privilege and those in poverty may grow a bit wider, but at least our kids will have fewer competitors for that college admissions letter.
- Or when we invite people to cross our borders, to pick lettuce and tomatoes for our salads at less than a minimum wage, just so long as we can cry "Immigration!" and send them back before they need medical care.
- Or when we want transgendered children to use the bathroom of the sex on their birth certificate, even if that very act will put them at the greatest risk of being attacked.
- Or when we want Syrian and North African refugees to continue to live in squalor: in refugee camps, subject to bombings and starvation, until we can be 100% certain no terrorist will use the two-plus year wait as a Trojan horse for entry into the United States.

For these, dear sisters in Christ, you *are* offering to make yourselves the expendable. For these, when we as the church might try to look the other way, you are to remind us of the Good News of Jesus Christ. The same Good News that we heard today: that Jesus Christ comes as one who serves; that the priorities of this world are and will continue to be upside down until all are served; and that in this work, we are all – every one of us - invited into *diakonia*, to be the ones who are expendable.

This, Maryan and Johanna, is the Good News you turn us toward. You today are answering a call to a special ministry of servanthood; a call to serve all people, particularly the poor, the weak, the sick and the lonely. Your mission will be to encourage and inspire all of us, whether we like it or not, to go into the world outside the four walls of our parishes and into being God's hands and feet for the renewal of the world. Because make no mistake – this is everyone's mission – even when sometimes we forget it.

So take us to that final frontier of our discomfort sisters: go boldly where no man – or woman – has gone before.

Put on that red; and be welcome to God's landing party.

May you, we pray, live long and prosper.

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