

In the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today, we are ordaining permanent deacons. We are celebrating the gift of servant ministry in this church. We have recognized, as theologian Frederick Buechner put it, that the greatest joys of Miguel and Steven meet the greatest needs of the world—and to extend the quote, the greatest needs of the church. We believe that God is calling these two men to touch both our world and our church and to meld the Gospel message into what they do in creative and inspiring ways.

How does one even begin to be able to talk about that? When I want to understand the greatest needs in our world...I often turn to the headlines—to find out what's going, where attention and energy are being drawn. Recently, in looking at the news, I realized that there is a great thirst in the world for something that is both new and embraces the past, something that teaches us important lessons... a great thirst for a new Downton Abbey movie. After six seasons spanning 12 years, the beloved characters of this British television drama are making their way to the South of France.

Now, bear with me... I know you are probably wondering what this British television drama movie about the day to day lives of an Edwardian-era aristocratic family and its domestic servants has to do with diaconal ministry. What does it have to do with the grittiness and chaos of serving the underserved and loving the unloved in our world?

I'll tell you what it is: Downton Abbey gives us a new lens for thinking about servanthood and what it means. At the heart of it, this television show turned our understanding of servanthood upside down in some of the same ways that our scripture readings for today do.

In many stories, the servants are background characters, window dressing if you will. In Downton Abbey, **the servants are real people**...and if we are being honest, sometimes the staff and what they get up to are even more interesting than the aristocracy. Mr. Carson, the butler, for example, grew up on the estate and is the one who both sees its limitations and safeguards its gifts. He also is in the thick of everything: discovering who is pilfering family riches, the first in the household to contract the Spanish flu, the one who stands with the daughter of the family before she descends the staircase to be married. (And that's just the first three seasons.... I could go on, but will resist.) He is the one that brings the newspapers and mail to the family—the one who helps them connect to the world outside the estate.

I know I don't need to tell you this but deacons are real people too...perhaps some of the most interesting and real people you will ever meet. One of our ordinands has served in the White House in close touch with a presidential administration and and feels just as happy serving meals to the homeless in the streets of San Francisco. The other has taken on a variety of helping professions from mail carrier to firefighter to police officer. He has spent his life striving to help people more. They are reminders to each and every one of us of the promise of Jeremiah—one that we affirm at our

baptism: that we were known and consecrated by God to be prophets and servants to the world.

In addition, **the work the Downton Abbey staff is diverse and addresses a variety of worldly needs**, from Mrs. Hughes in the kitchen feeding the hungry to the valets and maids tasked with clothing the naked and the footman who served at the table as Stephen and the other first deacons in Acts of the apostles were asked to do. In this diocese, the deacons take on similarly pragmatic work—Don't get me started on this... we have more than sixty deacons in this diocese including those who are “retired” (and I use that term very loosely in many cases) to those who are active. I have more stories about what gets done than we have deacons, including visiting the homeless in the streets with conversation, prayer and pragmatic help; gathering books to bring to jails and prisons; knitting prayer squares; calling shut ins; or fixing and sending computers to school children in Africa.

In the world, the focus is often on who has the power, who has the money, but, **Downton Abbey reminds us, at the end of the day, influence is a quieter but equally powerful force.** Consider Anna, the ladies maid at Downton. Although the servant of Lady Mary, she is the one who can speak frankly to her and offer her a perspective different than her own. One might call her a prophet. She spent at least one season fighting to get her husband released from prison—because he had been imprisoned unjustly. Do you see where I'm going here?

Deacons do not have authority in the church... but we do have influence. That influence is built on a history of speaking the truth that God puts in our mouths in ways that people in power can hear and respond to.

In part, why the servants of Downton Abby are interesting and have built influence is because they have a potentially broader and deeper perspective than the aristocracy. That is because they serve. That is because they have no standing in the household.

They stand in the corners of the great halls while things are happening and move through the streets of the town and hear what the neighbors are saying. They synthesize that in new ways. Brought together these various perspectives build a different kind of wisdom.

Deacons are the same: We spend time in church and we spend time in the world... We come as the heart and hands of Jesus, the voice and eyes of a loving servant, and arrive without many expectations about what will happen or how things will be. We show up wanting to understand the needs of those that we serve. In that, we have an opportunity to see potential connections and possibilities in special ways.

As deacons we remind that church that we believe in a radical gospel of love, love that is lived in actions and words; that is demonstrated in thoughts, prayers and plans; and that is embodied in listening ears, a gentle touch, and sometimes moments of silence. We are reminders that the Gospel turns the way the world is upside down and inside

out. We hang on to Jesus' promise that Jesus calls his people into places where we turn away from rank, status, and power....knowing that when we turn away from those things we inherently move toward God.

May I invite the ordains to stand?

Miguel and Stephen, here is the charge that I put before you as you begin this new adventure:

- Be the person God created you to be...and never waver. The world needs the person you are—and God delights in it.
- Listen carefully for the voice of God in your ear...and be brave enough to speak the words that God has given you lovingly both in the church and in the world. Know that it has the capacity to create something new and holy.
- Understand that your work and life as a deacon, what God will call you in ministry will evolve in change in ways that will surprise you. Don't fight it. God is a nag...and it's an argument you will not win.
- You love God and Jesus, you love this church and you love this world. Bringing all of that together is complex, but stand in the midst of it all and speak your truth. We will listen and we will be better for it.

Preached by the Ven. Hailey McKeefry Delmas, Archdeacon of the Diocese of California, at Grace Cathedral on December 4, 2021. (The Ordination to the permanent diaconate of Miguel Bustos and Stephen Tiffenson.)