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St. Francis, Palos Verdes
Last Sunday after Epiphany
February 7, 2016

Readings

Exodus 34:29-35

2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2

Psalm 99

Luke 9:28-36 [37-43a]

I'm so glad to be with you at St. Francis this morning. It is particularly appropriate that I was invited to preach about the diaconate today, this being last Sunday of Epiphany, Transfiguration Sunday. OK, the truth is that had I been invited to St. Francis on a different Sunday, I would have also found a reason why it was the perfect time to preach on the diaconate.

Pentecost, for example, with its theme of reaching out to people of all languages and cultures fits the diaconate very well. Yes, I confess that my enthusiasm for the ministry of deacons is such that I can find an excuse to talk about the diaconate on any occasion, and with reference to almost any Bible passage.

But with that confession out of the way, I do find a real connection between the gospel accounts of the Transfiguration of Jesus and the work of deacons. And the version of the Transfiguration story that we heard this morning from the Gospel of Luke is particularly helpful in illustrating the connection.

Each gospel account of the Transfiguration of Jesus begins the same way. Jesus took three of his disciples, Peter, James and John, up on a mountaintop to pray with him. Going apart to pray was not unusual. Jesus did that regularly, often taking a few followers with him.

But this time, while they were praying together on the mountain, something amazing happened. Jesus' face began to glow and his clothes became dazzling white. Although I wonder, do you think maybe Jesus always looked like this and what changed was the disciples' vision? Perhaps on the mountaintop the disciples were gifted with a mystical moment in which their eyes were opened and they could see Jesus in his true glory.

At any event, once they saw Jesus in his transformed state, then the disciples saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to Jesus. *They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about*

to accomplish in Jerusalem. And then, as if these unexpected events were not enough, a cloud covered the mountain and the disciples heard a voice proclaiming: “This is my Son, my Chosen: listen to him!” After that, the vision ended.

Whatever doubts Peter, James and John may have had before about who they were following, their vision on the mountaintop would have laid these doubts to rest. What an experience. Maybe like me, when you hear the story of the Transfiguration, you think, “Oh, if only I could have been there too.” Such graced moments, when we experience God in a tangible, direct way are emotionally overwhelming and spiritually grounding. They are wonderful. They are also very rare. As my friend Gary says, mystical visions cannot be prefabricated or preordered.

Not surprisingly, Peter, James and John wanted to stay on the mountaintop; they longed to remain immersed in the mystical experience. Peter, always trying to be helpful, suggests that he could build huts for Jesus, Elijah and Moses. But Jesus knows that they must come down off the mountain.

Like the disciples, we wish that those luminous moments when we feel surrounded by the presence of God could last forever. But they can't. This is why I particularly appreciate the version of the Transfiguration of Jesus that we heard this morning from the Gospel of Luke. It makes the connection clear between the mystical vision on the mountaintop and the nitty-gritty of life that comes next.

The gospel account continues: *On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him.* People were desperate to get close to Jesus because they were suffering. Jesus offered them healing, not only words of comfort and instruction, but also real, tangible relief from their suffering.

In this instance a father begs for healing for his only son. He says that a spirit throws him to the ground; the spirit makes his son shriek and foam at the mouth. Modern commentators have suggested that the son may have suffered from epilepsy. That sounds plausible to me, but I don't want the search for a reasonable sounding medical interpretation to distract us from a deeper truth. The Gospel of Luke uses this kind of dramatic language to make it clear that both the father and his son are caught up in a desperate and frightening situation to which they have no solution.

That's the situation we're all in without God. The father couldn't help his suffering son. The spirit was also too powerful for Jesus' disciples to overcome. But Jesus tells the father, “*Bring your son*

here.” While he was coming, the demon dashed him to the ground in convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. And all were astounded at the greatness of God”.

Let’s pause for a moment at the final sentence: “All were astounded at the greatness of God. This morning’s reading from the Gospel of Luke makes it clear that the mystical vision on the mountaintop and the healing of a boy possessed by a spirit both reveal the greatness and glory of God.

My friend Gary Commins, who I mentioned earlier, recently published a book entitled If Only We Could See. In this book Gary explores connections and similarities between mystics and social activists. He argues that both mystical vision and social activism are important (and dangerous) because they challenge the status quo. But he also reminds us: “There is no glory of the mystic nor glory of the social activist, but only the glory of God.”

So finally this brings me to the ministry of deacons. While I don’t want to overdraw the distinction, you could say that the ministry of priests is to lead us up to the mountaintop to pray and listen for the voice of God. And the ministry of deacons is to lead us down from the mountaintop into the crowds where we encounter God in human suffering and healing.

When a deacon is ordained, the Bishop gives us two important instructions. First: “In the name of Jesus Christ, you are to serve all people, particularly the poor, the weak, the sick and the lonely.” Then: “You are to interpret to the Church the needs, concerns and hopes of the world.”

As deacons we are called to take the church out into the hurting world and to bring news of the needs of the world back into the church. This means that deacons constantly walk with one foot inside the church and one foot outside. I assure you, this is not a comfortable way of walking.

Today we have fifty deacons serving in the Diocese of Los Angeles. And that means there are probably at least fifty different ways of explaining what a deacon does. The easiest part of diaconal ministry to describe is what you see on Sunday morning. The liturgical roles of deacons are, for the most part, clearly established in the Book of Common Prayer. When a deacon is present, he or she should be the one to read the Gospel, bid the Confession, set the altar for the Eucharist, clean the altar after the Eucharist and do the dismissal at the end of the service.

But the heart of a deacon's work is NOT what we do Sunday morning. It's what we do the other six days. A deacon's work in the world can take many different forms. Deacons serve in jails, hospitals and in schools. Diaconal vocations include helping homeless folks get housed, helping sick people get health care and helping gang members go straight. But what all deacons have in common (or should have) is that they are *servant leaders*. Both parts are important, *servant* and *leader*. Every deacon I know is willing, even eager, to provide humble hands-on service in the most marginalized, most neglected corners of human life. But deacons cannot, should not, do this work on their own. Deacons are ordained to serve as icons or catalysts for the *diakonia of all believers*. Deacons encourage and help others live fully into their own baptismal vows.

This is the fifth year I have been traveling around the diocese preaching and talking about the diaconate. The goal has been partly educational, since many people even in the church are still confused about who deacons are. But even more, the goal has been to raise up deacons.

During this time I have come to understand better than I did at the beginning that being a deacon is not a call for everyone. The work is hard, the pay is poor to non-existent, and we mostly work at the margins of the church as well as at the margins of society.

But I can tell you that it has been an unimaginable blessing in my life to serve as a deacon for the last fourteen years. And I am convinced that right here, right now, at St. Francis, there are two or three people whom God is calling to join the Sacred Order of Deacons.

So listen carefully. God might be calling you.

Amen