

Ordination of Deacons, June 9, 2018, Cathedral of the Incarnation, Baltimore, MD.

Acts 6:1 -7; Luke 22:24-27

SERMON preached by Archdeacon Jane O'Leary

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Lisa and Paula, thank you for this the opportunity to preach today, on the occasion of your ordination as deacons in the Church of God. It has been a long challenging journey. Those who have discerned with you, supported you and formed you have now offered you to the church, and gone back to their pews. There is every indication that Bishop Chilton intends to ordain you very shortly, after you have heard the charge and made your vows. Then you will be deacons, joining a distinguished, hard-working and holy order of ministers who play an important role in our church.

I am a Michael Curry fan. When I hear our Presiding Bishop proclaim that we are the Episcopal Branch of the Jesus Movement, I hear an acknowledgement of the church's role and power in changing the world, and a commitment for the church to step up and live up to its diaconal call. As such, I hear a validation of the role of deacons in the church. This is good news for deacons who at times have felt they are not quite understood.

Bishop Curry says, "The Episcopal Branch of the Jesus Movement is out to change the world from the nightmare that it is for so many, into the dream God has for it." This is affirming for deacons whose work is to lead the church toward its outward call, toward the realization of the Kingdom of God. We have been asserting the importance of the church's role in the world so vigorously for so long, often feeling the onus of this role on our own shoulders, struggling to convince others of our Gospel mandate. And now the Presiding Bishop is singing this song with us – indeed he is leading the chorus and making it a number one hit. He tells us the church exists to fulfill the mandate of Matthew 25 – I love this man.

Our wonderful church is certainly mindful of, but has often struggled to prioritize, its call to redeem the ills of the world. Why is this? It is easy for the faithful to think of church as a destination, that its central concern is itself: its teachings, its property, its music and art, its liturgy, the safe social harbor it provides to those who come in and become comfortable. Certainly this is all to the glory of God, but what we call "church" is not the locus of the Kingdom of God. Rather it is the launching place for the church's important work of advancing that Kingdom outside its doors.

In the reading from the 6th chapter of Acts of the Apostles we see the early church in this same struggle about prioritizing the needs of the world. The apostles were on fire, ready to start a movement to achieve the vision Jesus had given them, of that same Kingdom of God! They were focused on preaching the word of God, growing the church, converting believers. It was exciting, heady work, teaching and evangelizing. But little crises kept distracting them. Always something about suffering or injustice. Something had to be done so the apostles could do their work. So they established the order of deacons to oversee these matters of the community.

Can't you just hear the apostles' problem solving session?

- "What's up with these widows – the free food distribution isn't fair?"
- "I've got to preach a sermon in an hour; we've got all these baptisms; we've got crowds outside clamoring to hear the Good News – we've got no time for widows!"
- "So how about - We find people of good reputation, full of the Spirit and wisdom, and put them in charge of people who need our help."
- "Who would want that job?"

But there were diaconal minded disciples among them. The apostles brought them together and might have said, "Look - Jesus was clear, the Kingdom will come if we do as he did to show compassion and challenge injustice. But we apostles have to build the church. We cannot neglect our work to tend to community needs. So you, deacons, will assure that the church does not neglect those who suffer. Others will do this work, but you will lead."

So the church established Deacons to be the guardians of its commitment to the hurts of the world. As much as we think of Acts 6 as our origin story, it's important for the church to recognize that deacons were only necessary because the church established a commitment to the broken world. The church would not neglect its ministries of teaching and evangelizing, and likewise, the church would not neglect its ministries of mercy and justice. So the early church, as it was figuring itself out, committed to prioritizing both, and neither to the exclusion of the other.

So – we've got this world that is a nightmare for so many. Where do we deacons think we even start?

Deacons, have you ever been asked when you will be ordained? When you'll become a priest? What seminary did you attend? We are not on a path to becoming priests, and we generally don't have seminary degrees, but we have been paying attention to the tough conditions of the world, and we really do believe that the church can impact those conditions.

I am not a theologian, but I apply my own simple theology to the question of how to approach this commitment, and today I offer two simple principles:

1. Thy Kingdom come; thy will be done." I have been repeating those dry, rote words, at least daily for over 60 years – maybe 20,000 times. But somewhere along the line I have come to find inspiring, applicable meaning in them. "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done." Or, said more plainly, "The Kingdom of God will come when we do God's will."

The Kingdom of God is not a passive expectation – where we patiently wait for its delivery. Rather, it is Christ's vision with which he calls us to action. If we want the Kingdom, the reign of justice and love, we must work for it; we must seriously bend the world to God's will. In our very community we tolerate a system where only some people have enough to eat, where only some people have secure, dry shelter, where only some people can access healthcare when they are sick. Is this God's will? These are issues that are treatable. It is God's will that we adjust our

policies, our resources, our priorities; that we sacrifice and re-allocate until we have enabled the dignity of every human being. The Kingdom of God will come when we do God's will.

2. My second simple principle: What Would Jesus Do?

Our Lord and Savior came not to be served, but to serve. Deacons come into the aisle and read to us about Jesus's ways all the time. Jesus showed us how to reach down and heal; how to care for the rejected, the forgotten; how to raise hell and rock the boat; how to change minds; how to transcend social prejudices; how to astound those in authority with his humility and unimpeachable integrity. The church must go beyond proclaiming the word of Jesus, and practice the acts of Jesus – that's what the Jesus Movement is about.

The church might sometimes see the charism of teaching and evangelism and the charism of justice and compassion in competition with each other. I reject that paradigm. The last line of our reading from Acts says, "So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly." Many came to faith due to the apostles' teachings, but surely many came to faith due to the way the church responded to the needs of the widows. Faith activism has always been an effective way to grow the church, and change the world. And here's a bonus: as we transform the world, we are personally transformed as well.

So Paula and Lisa, you arrive now to answer your call – to the place where your deep gladness meets the world's deep needs, according to Frederick Buechner. I speak for all the deacons of our diocese when I express our deep gladness to have you join our ranks. You will be bearers of the chief gift that deacons bring to the church: the diaconal lens. This lens helps the church to see the hurting world. This lens helps the church to recognize conditions that offend the will of God, and this lens helps the church to imagine how to change those conditions, by imitating Jesus.

Earlier I implied that you have come to the end of a long journey. In truth, you have come to the beginning of long journey. No one is surprised that you have achieved all that's required to become Reverend Deacons. The surprise is what will happen after you and your diaconal lens go to work. What will the church accomplish by your gifts and your ministries? The surprise answer will surely glorify God, bless the church, and bring us ever closer to the Kingdom of God.

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