

*Sermon at the ordination of Dianne Wilson to the diaconate
on Saturday, November 2, 2019, Diocese of Western Massachusetts
by the Rev. Derek Scalia, Deacon*

“Becoming like the Youngest”

Luke 22:24-27

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

It was just a little over a year ago, that Dianne was in West Hartford, CT for the Provence One Deacon School formation weekend retreat. It was our section on community organizing and discerning where God was drawing us into the neighborhood. I was supposed to be with them, but my wife and I were anxiously awaiting the birth of our second child. Due to the advancements of 21st century technology, I was able to join them via Zoom a digital classroom. For each session I logged in, I noticed a slight disappointment from all those gathered in Connecticut. As much as they so thoroughly enjoy my presence, they were more eager to hear the news of the birth of my son.

Well to everyone’s disappointment, the birth of Daniel did not take place during the weekend. It would be five more days before he filled this world with his joy, laughter, and all wonderful things that babies bring into this world.

When I was reading the Gospel reading for this most joyful day today, I was reminded of my children, and all children for that matter. Jesus says, “The greatest among you must become like the youngest” (Luke 22:26). Now I am aware that this proclamation from Jesus was following a dispute between the disciples. But it had me wonder - what about the youngest is so great?

As a father of two young children, I have intimate connection to this question. There are many days that I ask the question - really, what about the youngest is so great? After all there are long nights, constant attention, always late for everything, and forget about packing to go away for a day or two. Sometimes I think I need to rent a freight train to carry all the “necessary” belongings.

However, to borrow a line from my daughter, “You know I think Jesus might be right.”- As if there was ever any doubt.

Babies and children draw us close. They fill us with a sense of wonder, we dream, we have hopes, and we are committed to the hard work to ensure that they are cared for, loved, and are able to thrive. There is something about babies that draws us into community. It may be a small community, but there is no child of God that is among us that was raised by themselves.

When I think of the diaconate, I believe that our leadership ought to be filled with all these things that the youngest bring out of us.

That through our service, our presence, and our interaction with others we are a source that fills people with wonder, causes them to dream, fills others with hope, draws them to love, and builds community. This is church in action, that sheds the ego self and turns to follow Jesus.

The beauty of diaconal ministry is that when we turn to God in this manner, it is no longer myself, Dianne, or any other deacon. Rather it is Jesus working through us, healing the world and pouring out his love again and again to all of God's beloved children. This ministry, this order of the Church, is through faithful servanthood to Christ for the sake of the world and out of the joy to be a witness for and with Jesus.

It is through our servanthood and our perpetual discernment that we attune our listening to where God is drawing us, and where the Church is needing to go.

Back in that formation weekend retreat on community organizing, we engaged in a spiritual practice of walking the neighborhood looking for God. This act of faith, sent out two-by-two, sought to listen to our neighbors and their stories of where God was in their lives and where their hearts are broken. Although not with the others on the retreat, I took part in the practice and found my way to the homeless shelter. I have done this spiritual practice a few times since then, deepening my relationship and connection with those to whom I did not know before.

One such visit to the shelter brought me face-to-face with Connor, at the time a two-month-old child who had lived nearly every day of his life in the homeless shelter. All bundled up to keep warm from the harsh winter elements, he opened his eyes and stared at me. Though Connor found himself in a place that I never had to live, and the hardships for him and his family were tremendously challenging, there was still the twinkle of hope in his beautiful eyes. As he stared at me, it was as if Jesus himself was staring at me proclaiming his love.

This is the power of Jesus' radical love. Jesus turns our world right side up. When we follow him, we find love in all corners and in all people. There is no longer those that are in and those that are out. Jesus binds us together, loving us for who we are.

This greatness is not the same greatness that we see exploited throughout our country and our world. That greatness is about consumption, lacks community, and puts the self in the center. It lacks vulnerability, and strength through might is often celebrated. That greatness is empty.

American life is programmed to be experienced at hyper-speed. At this rapid pace, people become consumed with their self-interest. People create a mindset that is focused on how they are going to get ahead, acquire the newest smart phone or gaming device, purchase that incredible house or awesome new car. At the end of the day, most people are so exhausted from this rapid pace that they feel grateful for the opportunity to veg-out while watching some reality show, which feeds the ego of the brain in the pursuit to desire more wealth and more things.

For some, they lose the connection to the realities or experiences that others are forced to live. They become numb to the woes, struggles, and injustices of the world. Numbness is sin against God.

However, when we lean into God's way of greatness, we are drawn into those things that moves us to action, makes us feel, and brings us into community.

God's radical love draws us into the inconvenient places of life. God drew me to Connor, and all those experiencing homelessness. God has drawn me to the margins of life to be a witness, to share hope, to give love, and to bring this message back to the Church. God has drawn me to the unlikely space of Planning and Zoning Board meetings to implore the members to develop zoning codes that embody our pursuit to love our neighbors and end marginalization of those already on the outs. When we follow Jesus, there is no end but the beloved community and kingdom of God.

My sister Dianne, God has drawn you through your mission work in El Salvador, and laundry love, your ministry of cuddling infants in the NICU, and walking the streets of Worcester. You have been raised and formed in God's love to prophetically proclaim the Gospel in all corners of life.

This hard work, this life of ministry, is only possible because of Jesus and our return to the greatness that he proclaims.

It is a ministry that seeks to soften our hearts of stone to be the flesh that God had always intended. It is a ministry that draws us back to the vulnerable, back into community, and leans into the hard places of life, without becoming hardened again.

It means showing up, to love without ceasing, to be drawn into deep community, and to dive deep within the eternal hope of God.

Jesus has called upon you to be great, not out of self-interest, praise, or acquiring more wealth and things. Jesus has called you to be great through the vulnerability of the youngest, and to be a source for God to transform the world. This ministry work will not be easy, but I pray that you, and everyone here, will find joy knowing they are in the presence of the Lord.

For when you find yourself in those places of great difficulty, I offer you this poem from my mentor, Daniel Berrigan:

Some -

*Some stood up once, and sat down.
Some walked a mile, and walked away.*

*Some stood up twice, then sat down.
"It's too much," they cried.
Some walked two miles, then walked away.
"I've had it," they cried,*

*Some stood and stood and stood.
They were taken for fools,
they were taken for being taken in.*

*Some walked and walked and walked –
they walked the earth, they walked the waters,
they walked the air.*

*“Why do you stand?” they were asked, and
“Why do you walk?”*

*“Because of the children,” they said, and
“Because of the heart, and Because of the bread,”*

*“Because the cause is the heart’s beat, and
the children born, and the risen bread.”*

Just as becoming like the youngest draws us nearer to the mission of God, it is also through our vulnerability that we endure in God’s mission. For we know that through community and our collective heartbeat, and the children born, and because of the risen bread that we are led to a life devoted to serve.

Dianne, it is through our humble and vulnerable selves that we answer God’s call to serve. May God’s presence always be known to you, and may you be a source of God’s eternal love, redemption, and mercy for all those that God draws you near.

So let us pray:

Lord, make us an instrument of Thy peace; Where there is hatred, let me sow charity; Where there is injury, pardon; Where there is error, truth; Where there is doubt, faith; Where there is despair, hope; Where there is darkness, light; and Where there is sadness, joy.

O, Divine Master, Grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled, as to console; To be understood as to understand; To be loved as to love; For it is in giving that we receive; It is in pardoning that we are pardoned; And it is in dying to ourselves that we are born to eternal life.

Amen.