

SERMON – ORDINATION OF DEACONS

October 8, 2022, Cathedral of St. Philip

We've come this far by faith

Leaning on the Lord.

Trusting in His Holy Word

He's never failed us yet.

It has been my privilege and a blessing to have walked with and guided this cohort through formation and now ordination to the sacred order of deacons. I think of each cohort as though I were a mother hen caring for her brood of chicks. No, I have not sat on them for many months, but I know that they are ready for hatching. God has called them to a very special ministry.

As I prepared this sermon, I read the words of Jeremiah who heard God appoint and consecrate him a prophet. Then the Lord put His words into Jeremiah's mouth, identified a task, and commissioned him to act as His agent. At the same time, I kept hearing bishops and presbyters referencing the prophet Isaiah, especially his call to all of us to be witnesses and speak God's word. The 19th verse of Chapter 43 spoke the loudest to me. "I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert."

My dear friends, The Wilderness is NOT permanent! Don't believe me? Pick up any version of the Bible – any version – and read the stories. I just referenced one. There's your proof! My ancestors who survived the Middle Passage and endured the tortures of slavery had to believe that the wilderness was not permanent.

In today's wilderness of division, hatred, disbelief, denial and manipulation of truth, we believe – we know- there is hope in the Lord. But we've got to show it. Go tell it on the mountain! Be a witness who let's others know that the wilderness is not permanent.

Here before you today are 5 witnesses. As deacons, they are ready to proclaim the Good News of Christ's Love, especially to those who are living on the margins - in the wilderness.

The diaconate has had a complicated history. Legendary deacons Ormonde Plater and Susanne Watson Epting, in her book, Unexpected Consequences, describe the modern-day diaconate as having evolved in seven waves beginning in the mid-19th century.

The first wave consisted of missionary and indigenous deacons who served from 1840 through the 1930's. Their ministries were focused on serving in remote areas with ministries that closely resembled those of priests – preaching, teaching and providing pastoral care.

The second wave from 1885 to 1970 was that of deaconesses, all women of course. There was an emergence of houses built for deaconesses who were to teach and take care of the sick and poor.

On September 24 of every year, we remember and celebrate the life of one of those deaconesses, Anna Ellison Butler Alexander, whose parents had been slaves in rural South Georgia. She was a “cradle Episcopalian” and the only African American ever consecrated as a deaconess. Dedicated to the education of African American children, she and her sisters founded St. Cyprian's School in Darien, Georgia. In 1902 she founded a one-room school at Good Shepherd Church in rural Glynn County's Pennick community. Consecrated in 1907, she served in a difficult time when the Diocese of Georgia segregated its congregations. That didn't deter her from traveling by foot and boat from Brunswick through Darien to Pennick showing loving care and witness to God.

In her notes Deaconess Alexander wrote, “I am to see everyone gets what they need...some folk don't need help now and I know who they are. The old people and children, they need the most...when I tell some they can't get help just now...that others come first, they get mad, a little, but I don't pay no mind and soon they forget to be mad.”

This is the epitome of what deacons are! Visionaries doing the work of God with Jesus Christ as our example. We're Johnny Appleseeds, forming relationships, planting ideas, initiatives and actions as we move from place to place. Will we encounter anger, frustration, rejection? Absolutely! Does that deter us? No Way! As one of the Blues Brothers stated, “We're on a mission from God.”

The third wave from about 1952 to 1970 was that of perpetual deacons, all men, who served in a pastoral role, more like curates.

The fourth wave began in the 1970's until the mid 80's. It was not only a time of transition for deacons, but also the entire Church. Deaconesses had become deacons and the Order had been recognized as being more adaptable and flexible. Although one bishop who recognized the need for specific training stated, "In a place for specific training, there was no place to train 'non-stipendiary deacons.' In a place for training priests, they are really second-class citizens." To some extent, this thought continues to exist, however, when more people come to understand who we are and why we are, the diaconate will be seen as a full and equal order.

The fifth wave is thought to have begun from the time the church officially began to use the 1979 Book of Common Prayer. Two themes emerged - Total Ministry of the Church in which it grew more fully into greater lay participation in liturgy, along with increased emphasis on the affirmation of baptism. More specifically for deacons was the theme of Servant Ministry. Those responsible for ordination processes would ask, "What is your diaconal ministry?" Individual ministries of service were the primary focus. An inherent danger was that some people came to believe that deacons were the ones who performed outreach ministry, thus letting everyone else off the hook. This wave of Definition revealed where deacons were active in direct service, educating each other and their congregations about the diaconate, and developing resources and educating the Church.

The sixth wave, beginning about 2000, was one of Interpretation, of building relationships and giving more specificity to the deacons' promise to interpret the needs, concerns and hopes of the world. In order to interpret, there must be emphasis placed on vision and focused on a prophetic voice.

The ancient prophets acted out of their love for God and God's people. As deacons you will be asked not only to see and interpret, but also to act. Not necessarily by being a thorn in the church's side (well, sometimes maybe), but as noted author and theologian Walter Brueggemann reflects in his well-known text, Prophetic Imagination, it's "about being both critical and analytical, as well as people who energize with Hope." (I love that. If only we all could project that.) *Energize With Hope*. Presbyters, you know, that will preach!

Major canonical revisions for diaconal ordination were also initiated during the 6th wave. The diaconate remains in the Interpretation wave while moving in the 7th or Integration wave. Although there are new opportunities for continuing education and deepening of relationships within and outside the Episcopal Church, it is clear that the diaconate is dynamic and changing on purpose.

So just exactly who are Deacons of the 21st Century? Some people within our parishes don't quite know. Others who have some knowledge and experience with deacons will begin by sharing a list of activities that deacons do. "They help out at the altar on Sundays; they read the Gospel; they "run" the food pantry or serve meals to the homeless; they say something at the end of the service; they do a lot of things around the church." Deacons are very good at doing things – some diaconal and some not, but always leaning into our servant identify and diaconal obedience, leaning on God's Almighty Arm.

It's not so much about what deacons Do as it is about Who we are and Why we are. We are called to be Deacons, not Priests-in-Waiting. We know who we are because we've been called by God to be visionaries, to see through a prophet's lens, like Jeremiah and Isaiah, to see the needs of those who many simply do not see. Deacons know that all Christians are called to Diakonia (the spiritual gift of serving) through our baptismal identity. We also know that our diaconal identity dictates that we are to constantly remind the Church that we are all servants. What do we say before parishioners leave the Eucharist? "Go in Peace to Love and Serve the Lord."

To my about-to-be newly hatched chicks and to all present I say, these fresh-out-of-the-shell deacons will bring a prophetic vision to the church. They will not let us forget the pain of the world with its poverty, hunger, homelessness, loneliness and loss of hope. They will encourage us to see the possibilities that lie ahead, always with the love of Jesus at the forefront.

As leading lay theologian, Verna Dozier, writes in The Dream of God:

Who will sing a new song, looking for a new way

Those who carry justice and mercy courageously forward in response to God's love

Those who dare the powers to travel to life's edges bringing the margins gently to the center in the riches of the poor and the blessing of the overlooked?

Who will live God's dream? These new deacons are ready to answer that question!