

Deacon ordination sermon

Bishop Paul V. Marshall (February 2, 2008)

Cathedral Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem

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



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The weather could be an issue today because, as our three friends about to become deacons know, if they see their shadow this morning, the ordination is postponed for six more weeks.

I introduce the groundhog theme quite deliberately and will return to it. But there's something we need to look at first.

The story before us in the sixth chapter of Acts gives us a glimpse into the life of the early church. The first four chapters of Acts show us that perhaps there was indeed once a golden age for the church. Those halcyon days were interrupted by a little persecution, to be sure, but according to these early chapters of Acts, it seems that after Pentecost the thriving church in its golden youth lived in complete peace and harmony for at least several...weeks.

Then in chapter five, the first crack appears. People could understand that following Jesus means sacrificing a good part of your income, and many gladly obeyed Christ, but some people among the very first Christians were already trying to find ways to hold themselves up as good church members without actually sacrificing anything they would miss.

When Peter confronts two of them with their hypocrisy in pretending to love and support the church without a genuinely giving heart Annanias and Saphira dropped dead, literally mortified at having the secrets of their hearts revealed. Is this frightening story what some might well dismiss as legend? I don't know, but it is clear that the writer of Acts thought that the problem of integrity in discipleship was in the Church from at least from Day Two, and so he tells this frightening tale to assist us with that problem.

So in the earliest memoirs of the church there are problems about giving, particularly in this case, about avoiding sacrificial giving to the treasury that the Jerusalem church raised to give new hope to the poorest among its family. That story alone is quite enough to deprive us of any serious Golden Age thinking.

But wait, there's more. As money accumulated, in Chapter Six of Acts, where our reading begins today, there arose among some of them a kind of proprietary attitude towards the money the church had collected, and people, even those who may have contributed little or nothing, were calculating what their fair share of the pie might be, and were also noisy in their suspicion that somebody else was getting resources to which they and their interests were more entitled.

Now this is all very ancient history, and could never happen today, but it is helpful to read what the apostles did about the volatile atmosphere that was displacing the breath of God in the life of the Church.

They knew that neither their calling nor their skills suggested that they micro-manage. Instead, they asked the church to select and present potential servants. The church found seven. The apostles prayed over them and laid hands on them, and the first servants (in Greek that's "deacons") were ordained to organize the church's care for those in need.

So the account of the very first ordination liturgy provides both frame and the template for what we do today. The *template* of selection, presentation, prayer, and laying on hands in the Bible is what we still follow – the selection process just takes a tiny bit longer nowadays.

The *frame*, however, is unchanged: the church is still surrounded by human need, and it must have people whose primary responsibility is to respond to that need, and to lead, goad, direct, and nag us all into sacrificing our money, time, and energy for the sake of those who are broken, hungry, or marginalized. And about the conflict: diaconal ministry keeps building peace in a perpetually troubled church by keeping us focused on the work Christ has given us to do and distracted from our ability to hurl the perfectly formed objection.

No matter what other order of ordained ministry any of you may be called to – and lets remember that for more than a thousand years, the fast track to being a bishop was to be a good deacon and that in those thousand years most bishops never spent one minute as a priest but years as a deacon – no matter what other order of ministry you may be called to, the foundation of all ordained ministry as this church has received it, is diaconate, the public setting aside of your lives and work to serve *and to get us to serve*. There is no such thing as a vocation to being

a “liturgical deacon” – the right to stand in public in fancy dry goods on Sunday comes from the weekday effort to care for Christ’s people.

So you three are to serve and get all of us to serve in a church that has, except for those first four golden weeks I have postulated, always had party conflict and theological conflict and moral conflict – not to mention very occasional personal conflict. In keeping us about the work of servanthood, you make peace.

So now we get to why deacons are different than secular counterparts. To do that, I turn to the gospel reading, where once again people are fighting, only here the fighting is less dignified. It isn’t just some people grumbling about which widows are getting what they need, but the eleven remaining disciples, fighting right in front of their master, Jesus. It is far, far worse even than that. In the verses *immediately* preceding this squabble, Jesus has just instituted the eucharist. That’s right. He has just lifted bread and wine, identified them with himself, and spoken of his death and the coming kingdom.

You would think they would be lost in awe and wonder at what they had seen and heard. But in the kind of psychological denial we all do when faced with an impending death, they didn’t focus on the remarkable gift of the eucharist and its connection with the cross Jesus was about to endure, but went to where their minds felt safe: to their grandiose fantasies about the coming kingdom. Instead of embracing the mystery just offered them, they began to argue about which of them was going to be Vice President in the Kingdom of God.

It is in another effort to save their souls, after three years of trying, that Jesus once more says that they have got it wrong: the drives they quite naturally have for success and affection are drives that find their highest expression in an attitude and life of service.

Christianity in its biblical form is not focused on masochism, guilt, or self-hatred, although those things surely infect some lives and distort some of Christianity’s sub-traditions. Christianity is about forgiveness – release from guilt. It is about life in the Spirit who is transforming us. It’s about God transforming some people’s masochism, other people’s guilt, and still other people’s aggression, or a few folks’ disproportionate libido, into something beautiful through lives of disciplined prayer, disciplined study, and disciplined sacrifice for others.

In short, the deacons, by what they do *and by what they insist that we do*, push us into the place where God changes us. They are agents of our salvation.

Our drives to succeed and to love find their highest and most ordered form when they are subsumed into the mystery of Christ. You can’t learn this just by reading about it. You can’t achieve it by thinking about it. You appropriate it by doing it.

This is why it is the prerogative, the absolute right, of deacons, when they participate in liturgy, to read the gospel and to set the table. Those two acts tell us that the Christ’s own words form us as we spread feasts for the poor, the cast-off, and the miserable. Those acts tell us that if our core identity, our ability to love and work, isn’t formed through conscious imitation of the mystery of Christ we aren’t there yet.

And of course, we aren't there yet. Enter Groundhog Day, the movie. As the film portrays it, over in Punxsutawney, Bill Murray is given ten thousand do-overs until he gets it right, and his built-in drives to succeed and to love are gradually transformed into those of a solid human, gladly altruistic, all without his getting a day older. He gets the girl, a pot of virtues, and becomes a great piano player. He alone wields a chainsaw in a movie without hurting anyone.

It doesn't work that way, of course. Deacons teach us, just by constantly reminding us of our calling and showing us their work, that we come to our maturity as persons through keeping on doing what Christ did, growing one day at a time until God calls us. Aging is part of that growing, and we don't always get the girl or guy, few can play the piano really well, and well, I'll never make sculpture with a chainsaw –but from the deacon's point of view, every day is Groundhog Day and we fail to embrace its possibilities at great cost.

But back to the Bible. I am fascinated by the last line of our story from Acts. With the deacons in place and taking care of daily ministry and basic fairness in the church, what some might call justice, the word of the gospel spread and the church grew. The passage ends with the tantalizing report that even many priests were converted.

Now of course the text is speaking of priests in the temple, the people from whom the familiar name Cohen comes. Let's enjoy taking it out of context for just a second and play with it. It's clear that doing this servant ministry will deepen your own conversion, but I wonder if we might fantasize a bit about how your ministry as deacons might lead to the conversion of any priests you work with. I wonder if your public diaconal promise to be identified with those who can least help themselves, as you persist in keeping it, will liberate any priests who might be burdened heavily by the institutional concerns they quite legitimately carry. It is possible that their hearts will be lightened as your ministry nudges theirs to focus on the essential joy of serving in Jesus' name just as two joyful women deacons once did for a quite earnest young priest on far away Long Island. But you must never ask me how I know this.