

Ordination to the Sacred Order of Deacons
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For years I have wondered about the choice of lessons for the ordination of a deacon. A few do make good sense to me. The dispute about greatness from Luke's Gospel is a powerful choice, and Psalm 84, which we will be singing in its metrical version during communion, is one of my favorites, with its rhythms of temple and pilgrimage.

But what about the call of Jeremiah? I have the feeling it was listed as a choice more than fifty years ago, when these rites were revised, and people were still thinking of deacons as nice young men, preparing to be presbyters once they had a little experience. In recent years we have ordained many more deacons who were not in their first flush of young adulthood. If we were using the lessons of the day, for the Feast of the Epiphany of our Lord, then I'd have as a springboard the story of sage adults who have traveled long and challenging journeys.

But revisiting this story from the first chapter of Jeremiah got me thinking about call stories. This one is a classic, and shows the pattern of calling which occurs again and again in scripture. It begins with a greeting from a divine messenger; then the commission; of course the objection - - who doesn't identify with having a reason for resisting a call; and finally divine reassurance, usually accompanied by a sign.

One thing my re-reading made clear: this is not primary source material for a biography of Jeremiah. It is in one way a calling card; here are my credentials for speaking to you. But it's bigger than just Jeremiah; it speaks of a time and a place, this call story. Of a context.

Of course Jeremiah is young and inexperienced. Young because in the story of the Hebrew people there is a long road ahead, a road of devastation, change, and return; around 40 years as it turned out. And inexperienced? When faced with radically new situations, experience is probably less important than creativity. Nobody had lived through this time of exile before. The times of Jeremiah called for a prophet who was bold, clever, and resilient, even if seeming a bit sorry for himself at times when faced with the long haul of his and Judah's situation.

Think about the other call stories from scripture you know, and how they are also of their times and places. Moses' story is perhaps the grand archetype of them all. When a people have been enslaved and rendered voiceless, who better among them to speak truth to Pharaoh's power than someone who is tongue-tied, and bicultural at that.

And what about Mary, whose story we rehearsed just two weeks ago. When people are rendered landless by a global colonial power and its puppets, who better to be called to begin the revolution than a young woman peasant.

The call stories remind us that leaders reflect their times, and in these biblical calls we learn about context, not just persons.

Which brings me to this question: what of our time and place? What about our context, the one within which people are called here and now?

In the context I know best, that of Sonoma County, life has been particularly unsettled and challenging. Over the last seven years we've had a cascade of emergencies - - fire, flood, fire, pandemic, fire and pandemic, and so on. Only 2023 was a year without some major disruption and loss, just some winter flooding and a colder than normal year, delaying the harvest. But this almost normal year was set against a backdrop of national political gridlock (greedlock), conflicts and wars everywhere, and global ecological catastrophe. As one of the members of the prayers-of-the-people working group at the Church of the Incarnation always reminds us, people are anxious; they're concerned about strife and violence in so many spheres of life, and worried about a future difficult to envision.

At the same time, church has been a pretty good place to be after the worst of our recent plague years. In the congregations I've attended recently, people have regathered and seem happy to be together to sing and pray, to attend to sermons and studies, and to visit over coffee. It's wonderful to regroup in community.

But here's what I struggle with: what kind of church are we called to be in these times? Are we called to circle the wagons and attend to the needs of one another? Or are we perhaps called to move out and attend to the needs of the world?

Might we be called to employ the energy and strength which we draw from being a community grounded in Christ to address the concerns of our communities, our contexts, in action as well as in prayer?

You see where I am going with this, right?

If we are called to enact in new ways, appropriate to our place and time, the call to the church to exist for others, then what kind of church do we need to be?

How about a diaconal church?

That is, a church where all together, and members in their various everyday lives, with a diversity of gifts and opportunities, live out a life of service, bringing the mutuality which we practice when we are together into a wider sphere - - broken communities; a big, broken world.

And if that is our context, and this is our collective calling, then who's being called to lead by exemplifying the diaconal character of our life together?

Of course, it's those with a diaconal heart.

Deacons, who sign, model, and encourage a life of service, a life of service that stretches beyond reacting to needs, to engaging concerns and fostering hope.

A statement from Association for Episcopal Deacons in 2014 includes this sentence:

“While diakonia begins in unconditional service to neighbor in need, it leads inevitably through advocacy and prophetic proclamation to bear witness in word and deed to God’s presence in the midst of all life.”

My fellow deacons - - and some of you will recognize that it’s not the first time I have expressed this - - we have work to do as we emerge from the cavalcade of crises that have beset us, in a diocese and on a planet that will undoubtedly see more. Let’s recommit ourselves to proactive work, to goading, prodding, urging our congregations and our diocese in a life beyond the walls of the church, in service to others, using our many gifts in our times and in our places.

Now this is the point where one sometimes gives a charge to those individuals about to be ordained.

I’m not doing it. The liturgy, in words spoken by our bishop today, and addressed to you, gives most of the instructions you need.

But I am going to charge all of you here - - and this is the most important charge I could give - - live into your baptisms, exercising the diakonia which we all share in Christ’s name. And let the deacons who serve in your midst be a reminder of the diaconal shape of our interdependent lives of service.

That’s my answer to the question I posed earlier. We **are** called to employ the energy and strength which we draw from being a community baptized and grounded in Christ to address the concerns of our communities, in action as well as in prayer.

One of my favorites in the Christian Responsibility section of the Hymnal sums up, in the first line of the last verse, the diaconal vocation we all share.

*Called by worship to your service
forth in your dear name we go.*

And verse three lays it out in a little more detail:

*As we worship, grant us vision,
till your love’s revealing light,
in its height and depth and greatness,
dawns upon our quickened sight,
making known the deeds and burdens
your compassion bids us bear,
stirring us to tireless striving,
your abundant life to share.*

Deacon Phina Borgeson