
Deacon Ordination Sermon

A Sermon by the Rev. Buddy Crawford
Saturday in Easter Week
Mark 16:9-15, 20

Stephen, Brandon, and Burl today the Church gathers to support you as you make your vows to diaconal ministry; vows that will change you forever, in visible and invisible ways. Of course, one of the most visible ways is that you are now wearing a clerical collar. You may have figured out the right size and even how to attach them to your clerical shirts, but figuring out how to "wear" your ordained life is a little more challenging. For example, wearing a clerical collar in Atlanta draws little attention, if any at all, whereas in Covington, Georgia the small town where I did my seminary training, it is a rare sight.

Shortly after I was ordained a deacon, and still serving the Church in Covington, I had a challenging experience. I was leaving Sunday services to return to Atlanta and realized I needed to get gas. I stopped at a local gas station, filled up my tank and then went inside to get something to drink. As I walked to the back of the store, a woman gawked at me, watching my every move. When I reached the checkout counter she was there-I tried to avoid making eye contact with her, but as the attendant handed her change to her, I inadvertently glanced in her direction. That was all it took. She looked me directly in the eye and asked, "Well, what kind of preacher are you?"

In an instant a flood of thoughts filled my mind. How would I explain that I was a transitional deacon preparing to be ordained a priest in the Episcopal Church? I let those thoughts slip away, knowing that attempting to explain our ecclesiastical polity wouldn't be helpful-it's confusing enough to us. Instead, I turned and smiled at her and said, "Well, I hope I am a good one." The woman took a step back, carefully looked me over from head to toe and replied, "Well, I hope you are a good one too!" With that said she turned and walked out of the store. The manager, who knew me from many previous stops, broke into laughter. But as I laughed with him I wondered about her question, "What kind of preacher are you?"

Over the past couple of years I have replayed this scene over and over again. Whatever the woman's denominational affiliation might be, I imagine that she was asking about something more profound than my "preaching" skills. Her use of the word "preacher" is as layered in meaning as our use of the words bishop, priest, and deacon. What does it mean to be a "good preacher?" I have come to believe that at the heart and soul of being a good preacher, of all ministry, lay and ordained, is the ability to be a good listener. It is impossible to preach or teach, to lead or care for others without the willingness to listen to the hopes and dreams, the joys and sorrows, the concerns and needs of the community that we are called to serve.

The opening scene in our gospel lesson is the first day of the week, the day of resurrection. Jesus, freed from the bonds of death first appears to Mary Magdalene. Like Jesus, she too has been released from bondage and has experienced the gift of new life. Mark tells us that during his ministry Jesus set her free from seven demons. Now, in his resurrected state Jesus comes to her once again. We do not know what Jesus said to her; maybe he spoke words of comfort or encouragement. What we do know is that she immediately shares her experience of seeing Jesus with his disciples. Mary finds them still caught up in the horrific events of Good Friday, mourning and weeping their loss. When they hear that Jesus is alive and that she has seen him, they will not believe her testimony. She is after all only a woman; and a woman with the stigma of

having once been possessed. Mary's voice carries little weight in a male dominated culture and the disciples dismiss her along with the news she brings.

Next, Jesus appears to two more people as they are walking in the country. They may be the two who were walking on the road to Emmaus-Cleopas and his companion. If it is, then we know from Luke's gospel that they are not part of the inner circle of the disciples. When Jesus appears to them they are in conversation still trying to make sense out of the events of Holy Week. After encountering the risen Lord they turn around and return to Jerusalem, bringing the news that they have seen Jesus, alive. But their testimony of Jesus' appearance once again falls on deaf ears and the disciples refuse to listen to their message.

Last of all Jesus shows himself to the eleven as they are sitting at the dinner table. Jesus upbraids them. But take note, Jesus does not upbraid them for not believing in his resurrection; he chastises his closest companions for failing to listen to the witnesses who bring the news that he is alive. It is only then that Jesus commissions the disciples to be witnesses to the world that death has been overturned by resurrection life.

The question, "What kind of preacher are you?" is a question that has many layers. Will you listen to the life of the parish in order to discern what vision or words of encouragement are required? Will you listen to the pastoral needs of the church? Responding with care and compassion to the transitions of birth and death, illness and loss, doubt and despair, faith and rejoicing? Will you be attuned to the needs of the surrounding community, ministering the love of Christ to those needing assistance, material and spiritual? Will you bring life, where you find despair and death?

The ministry of servanthood to which we ordain the candidates today is a ministry to all people, but as deacons they are to give particular attention to the poor, the weak, the sick, and the lonely. Stephen, Brandon, and Burl, this means that you will have to train your ears to listen carefully and intently to the world around you. You are called to a **life of holy listening** that is rooted in the Great Commandment: love of God, love of neighbor, and love of self. You will become skilled at discerning where and how to minister the love of God by studying, reflecting on, and praying with the scriptures. And you will need to hear not only with your ears, but with your eyes and with your inner being. It is when you love as God loves you that you can seek and serve Christ in all persons and come to respect the dignity of every human being.

As you pattern your lives after Christ, remember that he was more comfortable living with those on the margins, than in the halls of power and authority. The vows you make today ask you to proclaim the resurrected Christ in word and deed, within the community of faith and in the world at large. So as you move between these two different worlds take the opportunity to listen to the voiceless and the disenfranchised in both places. And then, you must proclaim what you hear and see and feel to the church.

Remember that the work of a deacon is not solitary work. It did not take long for the apostles to realize they could not carry on Jesus' mission by themselves, and to select the first seven assistants. You must engage us to work with you. You are called to a ministry of word and action. It is a prophetic ministry as well as a responsive ministry, in which you bring the needs of the world to the church and call the church to give her gifts to the world. So as you develop new ways of hearing, you also need to develop voices that speak the truth in love.

Ordination does not mean that you have to speak politely, without passion. At times you will need to speak out with boldness like Peter and John in the lesson from Acts. It is then that your proclamation may even amaze your bishops, priests and congregations. Use your voices to urge us to minister with you against poverty, injustice, and oppression; encourage us in the task of bringing healing and wholeness to as much of the world as possible. And if the authorities, secular or ecclesiastical demand your silence, I hope that like Peter and John, you will find that you cannot be quiet until justice and mercy and compassion become the order of the day. If society attempts to block your work then continue to speak out, pushing against the status quo. If the church refuses to listen, then call us to be accountable by reminding us of our baptismal promises.

The work of a deacon is not solitary work. The needs that you encounter are not yours to tackle alone; they will require the response of the entire community of faith. Your job is to raise our awareness so that the body of Christ will be engaged in the welfare of the world. Maybe the woman at the gas station posed a question not only for those of us who wear funny collars; but a question that is for every Christian to ponder-what kind of preachers are we?

There may be times in your ministry when you will want to be like the disciples and cower in fear, mourning the apparent absence of Christ. There may be times when courage eludes you and you cannot speak out like Mary or the other two, when you feel voiceless and marginalized. In times of fear or discouragement you will need to drink deeply at the well of prayer and nourish yourself with the Blessed Sacrament. The work of ministry is hard work, and while not solitary, it can be lonely. Develop relationships with colleagues whom you trust and who will listen to you, and who will speak the words of encouragement and hope you will need to persevere. Most of the time ministry is joy-filled work in which we seek not our own glory, but the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

So Stephen, Brandon, and Burl, chosen deacons in the Church of God; what kind of "preachers" will you be? Amen.

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