

Proper 21A
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
September 27, 2020
The Rev. Donna Barr

This week's passage is one of the most beloved passages in scripture. It is a go-to for learning what it means to live the Christian life: compassion, a spirit of unity, selflessness and humility, care for others, and the same mind as Christ. This is the scripture that best informed me of my call to the diaconate. And this is the scripture I quoted each time I began teaching my pastoral care classes. There is no denying that it is a powerful passage for deeper faith and connection to God.

Because there is so much confusion in our church about the Diaconate, I wanted to give you some background about its origin and meaning. It's also important for the church to recognize the specificity of the role. First what a deacon is not.....a deacon isn't intended to be a prize for having been a great layperson, nor is it second-place finish for wannabe priests...the diaconate is unique in nature and it's important to make sure it is indeed the ministry through which your gifts are put to best use."As a matter of fact many deacons have a ministry first and then someone in the church recognizes that wethe body of Christ could learn a lot and be gifted by this ministry. This is how it happened for me.

Deacons are members of one of three distinct orders of ordained ministry (with bishops and presbyters or priests as we call them). In the Episcopal Church a deacon exercises "a special ministry of servanthood" directly under the deacon's bishop, serving all people and especially those in need. This definition reflects the practice of the early church, in which deacons were ordained "not to the priesthood but to a servanthood ministry. In the book of Acts, we are told that the number of the disciples was greatly increasing. A complaint arose from the Grecian Jews against the Hebrews because the Grecian widows were being neglected in the daily ministry. The twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, 'It's not appropriate for us to forsake the word of God and serve tables. Therefore brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and of wisdom. In the ancient Greek-speaking world the term diakonos meant an intermediary who acted or spoke for a superior. Christian deacons were agents of the bishop, often with oversight of charity. Since ancient times the liturgical functions of deacons have suggested the activity of angels. As they proclaim the

gospel, lead intercessions, wait at the eucharistic table, and direct the order of the assembly, deacons act as sacred messengers, agents, and attendants. The revival of the order of deacons in the twentieth century has emphasized social care and service. Many bishops in the Episcopal Church expect their deacons to promote care of the needy outside the church. “Deacons themselves can have trouble defining their role. I think some people get drawn to the diaconate because they love church—but, as deacons, we have to remember to love the world even more.... It’s important to check in with ourselves to make sure we are being attentive to our ministry in the wider community.”

As many of you know my ministry in the wider community was that of hospital ministry.... serving those needy in body mind and spirit. Your Deacon Pat was also called to a ministry of bringing her care dog to schools for the handicapped and to court appearances so to calm children in difficult situations or learning. There are so many places of need in our communities, soup kitchens, homeless shelters, AA, Abuse Centers, health clinics for children.....the list goes on and on. In these hard times there are deacons abound as people are praying and caring for those with COVID and there are those who are leading in peaceful Martin Luther King style struggles for the rights, respect, and dignity of all our black brothers and sisters. And then there are those who simply bind up all the wounded with their compassion of love.

I’ve said enough about the order of Deacons....but what I know in my heart and see with my eyes is that "The witness of the laity, your Christ-like examples of everyday living as well as the sharing your own faith stories of the Gospel, is the primary evangelistic ministry through which all people will come to know Jesus Christ. In the Episcopal Church we call this the Ministry of the Baptized

The second chapter of Philippians which we read this morning is a message about Christ. Jesus is the focus of a healthy and growing church. Christianity did not begin with a theological formulation, a set of laws, or even a prayer form. It certainly did not begin with a document. It began with a person. Paul knew that to follow Christ the Church had to be committed to the person of Jesus Christ. Just as a lover cannot stop talking about his or her beloved, Paul cannot stop talking about his Lord.

“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And

being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death - even death upon a cross. Therefore, God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.”

Paul tells us exactly what to look for in the Christ. This is what he says. Jesus did not hold on to his rights or claims. He gave all he had. He humbled himself and became a servant to others. He was obedient all the way to death. Now to translate this to my own life I think it goes something like this. Donna, be very careful holding onto all the things and ideas and causes and claims and labels that you feel very sure and smug about. Remember, only God is God. Even Jesus did not regard equality with God. Donna, keep giving and don't give up just because you are tired or because it doesn't fit into your plans. Donna, humble yourself, have the heart of a servant, be last, be quiet and listen to others, be kind, be positive and encouraging to others.

You'll notice that when there's a deacon around at worship they are always the ones who dismiss the people with encouraging words to go forth in the name of Christ or to go in peace to love and serve the Lord.....or as you at St. Peter's say “ Our worship has ended now let our service begin.” Thanks be to Jesus. Amen.