

Ordination of Deacons (Char Mills, Ellen Loposer)

June 27, 2010

St. John's Cathedral

Sometimes the gift of wisdom is given to us in the oddest places. Imagine yourself in a hotel room crowded with college students in a pueblo in a place called Alpuyecá, Mexico. They are sprawled on the beds or sitting on the floor preparing to write in their journals. It is a hot summer evening and this group of Habitat for Humanity volunteers has gathered for their evening reflection on the day's work.

The student leading the reflection, a young woman who has just graduated, has a question for us. Think, she says, about the day you have just lived. The work you have done. The people you have encountered. And then think about all of the people you really didn't notice. Think about the woman who cleans the public restroom and sells toilet paper for two pesos. Think about the old man who ekes out a living picking up aluminum cans along the roadside near our worksite. Think about the children who swarm around you selling tiny packages of chewing gum. Who were those people for you? How did they fit into your day? What didn't you see? What might you learn from them?

You don't have to be in an impoverished pueblo in Mexico to have an experience like this. These are great questions to ask no matter where we are or what we are doing. Most of us move through our days unaware of a lot of who and what is around us. We just don't notice.

I mention this because I think this story from Mexico has something important to say about deacons as we gather today to celebrate and support the ordinations of Char and Ellen .

Deacons have a special vocation, I think, to be those people in the church who do notice what many do not. Who have a special vocation to help the rest of us see who and what we do not always see. And more importantly, who have a special vocation to serve the unnoticed and invite the rest of us to do the same.

This ordination liturgy summarizes this by calling it “looking for Christ in all others, being ready to help and serve those in need.” We will hear Ellen and Char say “yes” to this in just a few minutes.

A couple of millennia ago, the church wrestled with who would be people of vision and action in this way. In the reading from Acts, the church was struggling with how to distribute its resources in a way that was fair and helpful. There was an ‘issue’ developing between the Greek-speaking Christians – the Gentile converts -- and the Hebrew-speaking Christians, the converts from Judaism, because the Greek-speaking widows weren’t getting the food they needed for themselves and their families. It was a problem of justice. The church was growing, but not without some growing pains.

The response was to identify seven people who could tend to those kinds of matters. People full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. People who could see what others might not. People who could see and serve those on the margins – call the Church to respond to them. On the surface, this seems like a brilliant administrative decision. A job to be done and some good people to do it. But under the surface of pure practicality, we see a vocation emerging. Something we have come to know as the ministry of deacons. These were people who were gifted by the Spirit for this vocation: A vocation of seeing and serving. A vocation of seeing

Christ in all kinds of places. A vocation of finding significance in work that at first might not appear to be so significant; dealing with concerns that might not be on everyone's radar.

Benedictine Sister Joan Chittister says we are all called to develop a vision that is greater than what the world around us thinks is significant. When we do, she says, we come to understand that Jesus came to us as a child so that we might understand that nothing we do is insignificant but that every small thing we do has within it the power to change the world.

That's powerful stuff. And stuff that points toward what we are about in mission.

The whole subject of mission has taken on almost a life of its own in the Episcopal Church in the past few years. We are asking with a new vigor what it means for us to be about God's purpose in and for the world. Asking what it looks like not only globally but also locally. Those are questions we will be chewing on a lot in this diocese in the coming weeks and months and even years. How will we further the reign of God in this time and in this place?

I suspect that this concern with mission has not always been on center stage for us, even though the official name of the Episcopal Church is the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society. Quite often when we do surveys in congregations on their priorities, mission has not made the top five, even though it is at the center of our reason for being. Young adults and youth, though, get it better than older adults. Their generations are focused on service through high school and college and in ways that older generations have not been.

Mission is being about God's work – restoring all people to unity with God and each other in Christ. It is all of our work. Every one of us. But as those people who see what needs to be seen, deacons have a special leadership role as they call us to service.

Stephanie Spellers, in a wonderful essay called “Becoming the Missional People of God,” names three ways the Church lives into its vocation of expressing the missional love of God that Jesus came to show us.

The first is to be a community of the reign of God. Showing God's love in a tangible form, she says should be a sign of the reign of God come alive. Our deacons are among us to nudge us and coach us into those tangible responses to which we are called. The radical hospitality and generosity that stretch us and call us to new visions of what the Church is about.

The second is to be a messenger of the Reign of God. That means we are called to translate the good news for the local culture – whatever that is: the poor, the elderly, the young, the immigrant, the wealthy, the alienated... Deacons are called not only to proclaim the Gospel in the liturgy, but also to help us all proclaim the gospel – the good news – when we hit the streets. They do this by knowing what's going on out there. By being those bridges between the Church and the community and the world. They help us to understand and to communicate. To speak the language. To share good news with those who desperately need to hear it.

And the third is to be a servant of the reign of God. Jesus, who proclaimed to his squabbling and ambitious disciples, that he was among them as one who serves, put it into

perspective for them and for us. This was a clarifying moment. His example was to heal the sick, liberate captives, stand with the least, be centered in compassion. As we live into his model, we offer ourselves to this service and our deacons are our mentors and examples for this.

A community we call the Church that is focused on the reign of God – ready to be a messenger and a servant to further God’s purpose in the world, is moving ahead in mission. And it is also where our deacons live out their call to be not only the icons but the catalysts for servant ministry. Icons are beautiful things to look at but an icon is an image that we not only look at but look into the see something of God. It is an image with a depth dimension. A catalyst is what makes things happen. Gets things stirring.

So when our deacons proclaim the gospel at the Eucharist; when they call us to prayer for the church and the world; when they prepare the table for the holy meal; when they send us all forth to live into our ministries, they are calling us to mission. Those liturgical jobs are preparing the way for the church to be the church at its best. They are getting us ready to sharpen our senses. To see and do what needs to be seen and done. To know that each piece of our missionary enterprise, large or small, has within it the power to change the world.

Char and Ellen, you have walked a long road to get to this day. A road filled with study and prayer; with practical experience and reflection; with a parish community supporting and challenging you.

Both of you have shown that you can see what some do not and to translate your concern into action; that you can look for Christ in all others and be ready to serve those in need. Ellen, you have been an advocate for those with disabilities and have made us all see the need for accessibility in churches and other gathering places. You have helped your parish see the needs of the homeless as they work their way into stable housing. Char, you have worked for years with Habitat for Humanity as it strives locally and worldwide to eliminate substandard housing and helped others to share in that work. You have helped to feed the hungry at Holy Trinity's Dinner Table and worked hard in the realm of social justice seeing Christ in those places.

As you begin your ordained lives, keep helping us to see what some do not see and mentor us into service. Don't be afraid to speak up. Nag, if necessary. Remind us of the gospel message of good news and help us translate it by our words and actions for whoever needs to hear it. Say your prayers and help us to say ours. Strategize. Mobilize. And take an occasional day off.

May your ministries flow from your hearts and encourage us all to change the world.