

ARE YOU WILLING?

Sermon Presented to St. Paul's Church

2 Pentecost, Matthew 9:35-10:8 (9-23), Year A

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Deacons' ordinations are very meaningful to me, probably more so than ordinations to the priesthood. I think this is because whether one is a priest or a bishop, we are first, last and always a deacon---a servant of God and of the Church. I think it also has to do with the fact my ordination to the diaconate was the first time I ever wore the symbols of the vocation, a clerical collar and stole. So, whenever I attend a deacon's ordination, I can't help but be reminded of my ordination to the diaconate over twenty years ago and the sermon preached for the occasion.

The Rev. Kai Ryan, then the associate rector at St. Luke's in Mobile, was the homilist at my diaconal ordination. Near the end of her homily she gave me the proverbial "charge" where we stand up and listen to the preacher's admonitions and/or encouragement as we set out to begin our ministry. In her charge to me, and ultimately to everyone else present, she said, "My brother, whatever you do, stay faithful. When it seems your ministry isn't a challenge any more, stay faithful. When you are stretched to your physical and emotional limits, stay faithful. When you feel you are being attacked and misunderstood, stay faithful. In all things, stay faithful."

I thought at the time her charge was somewhat intimidating. The idea of being "attacked and misunderstood," seemed pretty daunting. I remembered thinking, "What have I gotten myself into?" Yet, had Kai added to this charge, "And God expects you to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons," I suspect I would have probably stopped the service and told Bishop Duvall, "I want to reconsider my options here. I don't recall taking courses in Cleansing Lepers, Raising the Dead, or Demon Eradication in seminary. I'm not quite sure I'm ready for this!"

Can you imagine Bishop Russell making the same charge to you at your confirmations? It could conceivably happen, you know. You don't have to be ordained to be a minister in the church. As it states in our *Catechism*, all of us are ministers of the Church. In fact, it states unequivocally that the ministers of the Church “. . . are lay persons, bishops, priests, and deacons.” (*BCP*, p. 855). Did you note who is named first in that list? The bishops, priests and deacons do not get top billing—it is you, the laity. That's because no ministry is more important than any other, including the ministry of bishop. Regardless of order, we are all set apart for ministry at our baptisms.

If we are all called to be ministers, then what are the qualifications for ministry? Most of us do not have extensive theological training. In fact, for many Episcopalians, just knowing the difference between the Old and New Testament puts them in the top 50% of the class! How then are we equipped for the work of ministry? Well, Jesus gives us a model for this in today's reading from Matthew.

In our gospel lesson, we see how Jesus commissioned his disciples to do the work of ministry. One minute he's going from town to town, preaching and healing, and the next we're told he summoned his 12 disciples and put them in charge of carrying out his ministry. Oh, Jesus knew them, of course. They had apparently been with him for at least a little while, but there were no discernment processes, no careful, objective evaluations to measure their ministerial potential, no theological education, and no preparatory charge in an ordination sermon. He just called them out and sent them off.

And the sloppiness of his process showed. You couldn't select a less qualified or less capable group of folks if you tried. For example,

One was a skeptic.

One was a tax collector, a certified sinner, and was hated by everyone.

One was impetuous, always making promises he couldn't keep.

Two were "momma's boys," hungry for power and prestige.

One was so greedy he stole from their common purse and sold out Jesus for cash.

Even a child could see the poor quality of this crew. In fact, a child has. Will Willimon, the former Methodist Bishop for the Florida and Alabama Conference, was teaching Sunday school one time. He recounted some of the stories of the disciples, including the betrayal by Judas, the denial by Peter, the abandonment by the rest. Afterward, Willimon asked his young students, "What does this tell you about Jesus' choices?" After a long silence, one little boy dared an answer. "I suppose it shows us that he was a lousy judge of character." And it's true. What's worse, it's still true. Take any congregation of any size and who in it is worthy or capable of being an apostle:

The recovering alcoholic?

The twice-divorced single mom?

The estranged couple putting on a good face?

The doubter who wonders if there really is a God?

The cynic who's been scarred by life's injustices?

The seeker looking for something solid on which to build?

Who is worthy or capable? Don't get me wrong. We are good people for the most part. But go to any church in our country and the disciple pool will consist of sinners like ourselves.

All of us are marked by sin and failure. Yet Jesus still chooses us. He summons us to him and gives us authority to tell others that in him the Kingdom of Heaven has come near and to minister to people's needs in his name. He summons and commissions us to be shepherds over a world of helpless and harassed sheep. That includes curing the sick, raising the dead, cleansing the lepers, and casting out demons. How can he do that? It's simple. The only qualification one needs to be a witness for Jesus Christ is a *willingness* to do so. All one needs is a willingness to let Jesus work through them. He will do the rest by providing his authority and his power for the work.

Willingness was the only credential the disciples possessed. They were not eloquent men, but *because* Jesus had given them his authority—his power—they were able to speak boldly of the kingdom of heaven. Because Jesus gave them his power, they were able to stymie their critics and convince their skeptics.

Of course, they were not men of medicine either. We probably wouldn't even want them around if we were sick. But Jesus also gave them the authority to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons. Jesus gave them the power because they were willing to go in his name and do what he asked. They were *willing* to let God work through them. Because they were willing to follow Jesus, God gave them the power to be witnesses that turned the world on its head.

Well, nothing has changed in 2,000 years. Admittedly, there aren't many opportunities for us to physically raise the dead and few of us actually know anyone with Hansen's disease, also known as leprosy. Yet that same charge he gave to his disciples is the same charge he gives us, if only in the metaphorical sense. We are charged to pray in the name of Jesus for those who are physically and spiritually sick and proclaim the power of God to heal us. We are charged to

help raise the spiritually dead by calling them out of their self-made or society imposed tombs like Jesus called Lazarus out of his. We do this by proclaiming boldly the power of God to raise us up and to give us new life in the Spirit. We are called to reach out to the modern-day lepers---those marginalized by society and even by the church in some instances---and not abandon them in their misery. For them we are to proclaim the power of God to restore them---and sometimes ourselves, to the community. As for casting out demons, we are to boldly stand up against the evils in this world that oppress us and others. In this instance, I am talking about the evils of hate, prejudice, religious self-righteousness, pride, and all the other demons that we are susceptible to. We are to proclaim the power of God to cast them out.

Though it's true most of us have not been given the power to physically cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and exorcise demons, we have been empowered to speak boldly about the Kingdom of Heaven and to invoke the Name of our Lord and proclaim that there is nothing we cannot do through our God in Christ.

So how is that played out today? What does a contemporary apostle look and act like? Well, you might be surprised. They come in all shapes and sizes, gender is irrelevant, and age is no limitation. Frankly, all it takes is an open and willing heart that expresses to God, as the words from a Vacation Bible School song of several year ago said, "Use me." Jesus use me. Take this life of mine and use me." That's it. God will do all the rest in and through you.

I'm reminded of something Barbara Brown-Taylor once said in her book, *Bread of Angels*. She observed, "At the end of every service, while the last word of the last hymn is still ringing in the air, a voice from the back of the church says, 'Go in peace to love and serve the Lord!' "Let us go forth into the world rejoicing in the power of the Spirit!" Those are not words

for consumers of God's love. Those are words for the providers.”¹ In other words, that is our ordination charge to us to do the work of ministry we have all been commissioned to do.

So, how about you? Do you have a willing heart that's ready to be used for the glory of God? If so, prayerfully consider how you can be an instrument of God's grace, then leave the rest to God for He will empower you for the work you have been called to do. And no matter what, stay faithful.

AMEN

¹ Adapted, Barbara Brown-Taylor, “Heaven at Hand,” in *Bread of Angels*, (Cowley Publications, 1997), p. 152.