

Sermon for the Ordination of Deacons

Episcopal Diocese of Delaware, Saturday, December 5, 2009

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“The greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves.” Luke 22:26. Really?! Let’s have a show of hands: how many of you really want to be treated like a youngster? Excluding the six of you about to be ordained, how many of you want to be treated like a servant? Is it any wonder, this admonition of Jesus has been resisted over the centuries? Would anyone pick this as their favorite Bible verse?

Yet, being like the youngest and becoming a servant have a lot to do with being a deacon in the Church. So, do any of the six of you want to back out? This is your last chance! And who could blame you if you did? (I mean other than Bishop Wright and the COM).

If we are resistant to being treated like youngsters and servants, imagine how much more astounding this admonition seemed in Jesus’ own day! We coddle children, spoil them, and romanticize childhood, but in Jesus’ day children were assumed to be ignorant. Since more than half the children died before they were five years of age, parents tended to steel themselves against this likely loss. Getting to adulthood as rapidly as possible was the goal, so childhood in itself had little value. Attitudes in the first century toward servants and slaves weren’t much better. They were an economic necessity but no one aspired to be a servant or slave. It’s certainly not something young people aspire to today.

Yet, Jesus with some consistency uses small children as examples of what it means to be part of the Kingdom of God, and in a number of passages, he insists he is among us “as one who serves.” His admonitions to become “like little children” and to become servants were designed for all his followers in every age. The fact that this passage from Luke is often used at diaconal ordinations does not imply that it is only deacons who should be servants or like youngsters. It is appropriate, however, because of the deacon’s unique role in the Church of modeling servant leadership and encouraging everyone to manifest the highest qualities of childhood.

What are some of these qualities? Children accept their dependence on others and know they are not in control. Life for them unfolds; they don’t try to take charge of it; instead, they utilize what they have and make the best of it. If children have difficulty sleeping it is not because the weight of the world is on their shoulders or because they’re worried about tomorrow. As we get older we like to imagine we are independent and we fool ourselves into thinking we can/must control our lives. We expend a lot of energy in worrying and in trying to stay on top; children expend their energy in play and in having fun. Independence is idolized in adult society: doing one’s own thing, making it on your own, not being dependent on others, doing it “your way” are all highly prized. Is it any wonder we misuse alcohol and drugs, need therapy, and often feel exhausted? We could learn a thing or two from children. God is in control; we are surrounded by other people who can and often will reach out to give us a hand, if we will let them.

I've been learning a lot about children, now that I have six grandchildren and the time to observe them. Here's a seasonal example: you take a small child into any store. The child sees things he/she desperately wants. You say, "No." The child continues to beg and plead. As a parent, I assumed this was a natural but annoying ploy of children to get their own way. As a grandparent, I now realize children do not understand terminal "no." Because children live in the present moment, your "no" said this moment may change to "yes" a few moments later. They simply cannot comprehend that "no" could mean "no, not now, not ever." So they test you out moment by moment. Of course, if you give in, as I sometimes do, you only reinforce this faith that the "no" of a moment ago can become "yes." As we get older, we lose this conviction that things can change; the seemingly terminal "no's" cause us to give up, become cynical, and get depressed. How would your life be different if you lived in expectation that the "no" you are currently experiencing might in the near future become "yes"?

Children do not hold grudges. I have a friend who I have known since we were three years old and lived next door to each other until I was nine. Every day we played together, and every day we got into fights. Because neither of us was very athletic, these fights were never physical; rather, they consisted of our hurling insults and threats over the fence which separated our two yards. We said some awful things to each other. However, the very next day, I would be on his doorstep or he on mine expecting to play as if nothing had ever happened the day before. I don't think we ever apologized to each other—it was deeply understood, we were best friends. With age we learn to nurse grudges, want to get even, and do things which destroy relationships. This is not true of children.

These are just a few virtues of childhood. I believe Jesus wants us all to be more trusting and open to the possible, to never be defeated by the "no" of the moment, and to strive to keep relationships healthy by avoiding holding grudges. Do these examples have any special message for deacons?

Many of you are already working or will work especially with people who are down-trodden: the poor and oppressed, the sick or disadvantaged. These are not people who kid themselves into believing they are in control of their lives; just the reverse, they sense themselves powerless. Bishop Wright will shortly deliver a charge to the about-to-be-ordained deacons: "you are to serve all people, particularly the poor, the weak, the sick, and the lonely." You will need to witness to them from your own faith—bringing hope to the hopeless, strength to the weak, healing to the sick and lonely. They do not need nor will they be fooled by Polly-Anna responses, nor will they be impressed should you look at their world "through rose-colored glasses!" What they desperately need is hope, hope demonstrated in your love and strongly rooted in your faith in Jesus Christ. For many, the only person in whom they will meet the living Jesus is you! No pressure, right? But your job as a deacon doesn't stop with loving the poor and disadvantaged—all Christians are to do this. You must be an advocate for them in the Church, in city and town politics, in the state legislature—you must speak to those who do have power and authority on their behalf, and you must work tirelessly to correct inequities, to change laws, and to especially change hearts. Doing justice is at the heart of the Gospel and needs to be a passion

for deacons. Being agents for creative social change is a very tough job, even tougher in a recession. You will need to draw deeply on your own faith. This is where a regular study of Scripture and a disciplined prayer life comes in. You will need to recapture that child-like dependence on God and avail yourself of the support of others in your community. Ordained ministry has no place for loners. At the end of the day, you will have to commit all your efforts and frustrations back to God in order to avoid burn-out. Burn-out happens when we keep giving and giving but don't take care to be nourished in God's service or when we start to kid ourselves into believing we have the necessary power in ourselves to be agents for change.

One of your hardest jobs will be convincing those with whom you work that "no" is not the final answer. Most of them are already beaten down and feel defeated. Nor can you as a deacon take "no," for an answer. Keep wheedling, pestering, and petitioning those in authority—it's your job! Like the widow in Jesus' parable, wear the judges of this world down with your insistence that justice be done! Don't be afraid to confront your Church community—diaconal preaching can be powerful and should always have an underlying message of justice. Unlike the priests of your congregation, you can speak more boldly even risking offense. After all, you are not the congregation's pastor, nor are you in charge, nor are you their employee. People may dislike what you say but it doesn't get mixed up with issues of authority, so they usually don't end up disliking you, only your message. That message over time may change their perspective, change their heart, and together with you they may become agents for change. Since you can't change the world by yourself, you should always be soliciting the commitment of other Christians to join you in this endeavor. Be gentle, but don't be afraid to speak frankly to your bishop! Over my twelve years as Bishop of Maryland, I depended on my deacons to hold my feet to the fire on issues of justice and this helped me from becoming ivory towered. In short, like a child don't take "no" for an answer.

Grudges are the luxury of those who have their priorities screwed up! When your feelings are hurt, move on, get over it. Keep in mind the importance of Christian community and the bonds of affection which can enable very different people, holding vastly different points of view, to work harmoniously together. Had more Episcopalians approached their life in the church like a child, valuing friendships more than self-righteous opinions, our church would not have experienced so many tragic fractures in recent years. The devil works through self-righteousness and is exuberant about communities who have lost sight of "preaching the Good News to the poor" because all their energy has been sapped by their disagreements. Deacons need to witness to the prime importance of mission to the world.

This pivotal charge Bishop Wright will give the six of you today: "You are to interpret to the Church the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world." Let me assure you, the Church desperately needs to hear these needs, concerns and hopes expressed with passion. The Church has become expert on hearing the needs, concerns and hopes of the Church. Some Church communities are so preoccupied with their internal needs and struggles, they have lost sight of the Gospel imperative to transform the world. The deacons call the Church back to mission in the world and help to equip the saints in being agents of social change for the love of God. You will find your

Church communities resistant to hearing this call; to some it will always seem more appealing to get the house in order than to move beyond Church walls to be Christian witnesses in the world. Deacons need to goad Church members to move out into the wider community, but first, they need to hear your interpretation of “the needs, concerns and hopes of the world.” This is where the term, “servant leaders” comes in.

For deacons ministry is not primarily doing the servant things: working among the sick, the poor, and the disadvantaged. These are ministries rightly belonging to lay people! Your job as a deacon is to inspire the laity to adopt these ministries with the same vigor with which they sing in choirs, work on the altar guilds, and serve on property committees and vestries. Working among the disadvantaged brings a sense of accomplishment and great joy, as anyone who has served food in a shelter or gone on a mission trip can attest. As deacons, don't hog these ministries; inspire others to share them—get them involved. This is where being a servant leader takes on meaning for the deacon. All Christians are called to serve and be servants, and deacons are called to serve the servants, to raise up people for service ministries, to recruit and coordinate them. This is where organizational skills, forbearance, and infinite patience come in, and these are the backbone of servant leadership. Servants are catalysts; they do not have the power to make things happen; rather, they work behind the scenes to assist others so that good things happen almost seamlessly. Remember the TV. series on Public Television, “Upstairs, Downstairs.” Mr. Hudson, the butler, Mrs. Bridges, the cook, and Rose, the upstairs parlor maid, kept everything running smoothly at Eaton Place, even given the tempestuous lives of the Belamys who lived upstairs. They each had little authority or power but they accomplished much through their tireless energy, loyalty, and their deep understanding of service and all it required. Deacons exercise similar service, and what a difference it makes!

(Candidates stand)

So, do the six of you still want to go through with this? I thought as much. For like Jeremiah, God has been calling you to this special ministry “before you were born.” Like Jeremiah, you know how inadequately your experiences and talents have equipped you for this demanding ministry. That is the beginning of wisdom. You know most people won't understand your special ministry; priests especially (in my experience) won't understand that you are not their free assistants. The six of you being the first in this Diocese in a long time, will need to explain what it is you are about at every turn. Teach by example. Do not get lost in being a servant so you lose sight of your primary ministry as a servant leader. Let God speak through you and let the Lord Jesus be your model for servant leadership. Yours is a crucial and very demanding ministry, so remember you are servants of the Lord Jesus and are to draw strength from the example of children. It will be enough! God bless you in this ministry!