Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany—Year B
Deuteronomy 18:15-20
Psalm 111
I Corinthians 8:1-13
Mark 1:21-28

At a certain point in the *The Ordination of a Deacon* service, the candidate stands before the Bishop who examines him. As I read through this, think about Greg.

- **My *brother*, every Christian is called to follow Jesus Christ**, **serving God the Father, through the power of the Holy Spirit. God now calls you to a special ministry of servanthood directly under your bishop.**
- **In the name of Jesus Christ, you are to serve all people, particularly the poor, the weak, the sick, and the lonely.** *Check.*
- As a deacon in the Church, you are to **study the Holy Scriptures, to seek nourishment from them, and to model your life upon them**. *Check.*
- You are to **make Christ and his redemptive love known, by your word and example, to those among whom you live, and work, and worship**. *Check.*
- You are to **interpret to the Church the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world.** *Check.*
- You are to **assist the bishop and priests in public worship and in the ministration of God's Word and Sacraments**, and you are to **carry out other duties assigned** to you from time to time. *Check and check.*
- At all times, **your life and teaching are to show Christ's people that in serving the helpless they are serving Christ himself.** *Check.*
- **My *brother*, do you believe that you are truly called by God and his Church to the life and work of a deacon?** Without a doubt—YES!

The **Diaconal Covenant** that Greg and I and the Sr. Warden have signed every year spells this out a little further:

- **A deacon is assigned to a parish by the Bishop to bring the needs of the world to the church through teaching, preaching, pastoral care and participating in liturgical activities which remind the parish of each baptized person's call to serve those in need.** *Yep.*
- **In proclaiming the Gospel, in contributing to and overseeing the Prayers of the People, in assisting at the altar and the distribution of communion, and in dismissing the congregation to go out into the world to love and serve the Lord, the deacon encourages the people of God to live out their Baptismal promises.** *Absolutely.*

On **March 2nd, 2008, Greg, you were installed as our deacon**, and on that day, we **gave you several symbols**.

- We gave you **a Bible** so that you could **help us to remember our call to proclaim the gospel and Jesus' love for the poor, the oppressed, the sick, the widowed, the orphaned, and all those at the margins of society.**
- We gave you **a towel** so that you could **help us to claim our call to servant ministry.**
- We gave you **oil** so that you could **help us to be agents of healing in the world.**
- And we gave you **a key** so that you could **remind us that this church is open to ALL people**.

For **eighteen years**, **sixteen among us**, you have **fulfilled ALL these things**, every last one of them, *from* your **head** *to* your **toes**, *from* the **depths of your heart** *out through* **your vast wing span** *through* your **finger tips** and *into* **the world**—you have **embodied** them, **iconed** them for ALL of us.

The thing about ***any* ordained ministry** is that it **reveals some aspect of our baptismal vows** that we **ALL are called to live out** and **shows us what it looks like** when these **vows** are **lived out** in **our flesh and blood lives**:

- You have **taught** us, **called us into fellowship**, **helped us break bread,** and **shown us how to pray**.
- You have shown us how to **persevere against evil and repent and return to the Lord**.
- You have shown us how to **proclaim the Good News of God in Christ in word and deed**.
- You have shown us how to **seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves.**
- You have shown us how to **strive for justice and peace,** and you have shown us how to **respect the dignity of every human being**.
- You have been that **prophet God promised in Deuteronomy** this morning.
- You have **cautioned us**, as **St. Paul** does, about **the limits of our liberty**, reminding us that **our actions can wound another** and that **restraint is a good thing**.
- Like **Jesus**, you have **taught us as one having authority**, an **authority** rooted deep in **mercy** and **compassion**, and you have shown us how to **be kind**.

You have shown us, in your ever so gentle way, how to **follow Jesus** and **his no holds barred, unconditional way of love**.

Greg and I met 16 ½ years ago when he was **preparing to retire from Volvo** and **make the move with Jane to Roads End Retreat**. All I knew of him was from a picture I saw of him **serving at the Church of the Advocate with really cool shades and a rainbow stole**. I knew he **loved Cursillo**, and that was about it.

"How would he do with us?" I wondered. We had a significant LGBTQ community, and I am fiercely protective of our people. **Would Greg welcome them, be inclusive, love them?** I asked Greg all those things early on, and he assured me he would.

Greg, **you *have* loved all people, ALL PEOPLE, especially those who are lost and lonely and vulnerable. *Would you love them?* You only know how to love, period. Love is who you are.**

It didn't take long for us to learn to dance together as Priest and Deacon *and* as Deacon and People of God. I learned pretty quickly that **you were all heart**. You **iconed** for us, always, a **servant's heart**, and you **enfleshed that heart in all your words and deeds** and in your **quiet, hands-on, whatever-needs-doing-let's-get-'er-done way of leading us**.

Your **dismissals are legendary**—I don't know how you've done it for hundreds and hundreds of sermons, but you have captured each sermon's essence and offered it up as a parting gift each and every Sunday to make sure that we all had our charge.

Your **height gives you a towering presence**, so helpful all the times we have **marched and protested for inclusion and justice**.

Presence is everything, and you have shared yours generously.

You stand out as **a beacon of love, and that matters in this world**.

And you have one of the **most tender souls** I know.

Along the way, **Greg and I had few disagreements**, *amazingly* few, like way less than one-hand's worth, and we found our way through them, each and every time, and always found our way back to one another. **We learned some good lessons about forgiveness with each other.**

We have shared some amazing joys and **some deep, deep sorrows** and **done some awfully hard things together; we've shared some trenches.**

We have become **friends**, **siblings**, **partners *and* partners in crime**, **soul buddies**—much more *these* things *than* our respective roles.

To **lead and do liturgy together** like we have for **all these years**—I mean **16 years** is a really, really long time—it is ***such a holy and intimate and sacred thing***. It **truly is beyond words**. It's **deeper than friendship;** it's **deeper than colleagues**; it is **sweet** and **tender** and **mystical** and **such a privileged place to inhabit with someone week in and week out**. It's been an **absolute gift to me** and **to this St. Luke's community** which has been **entrusted to our mutual care for all these years**.

And **Jane**, **we thank you, truly, for sharing Greg with us these past 16 years**. To **release your spouse to serve in a different faith community is big, big deal—thank you for the sacrifice *you* have made that allowed Greg to be the deacon *he* is *with* us.**

When we're **ordained**, it **doesn't just stop when we leave a congregation**. We are **ordained for life**, and it is a **transformation of our being**. **Greg, you have a diaconal heart**, and now, you get to figure out **how to live with that heart in a new way in your retirement**. That will **take time** to unfold. **Brother, be patient with yourself in the unfolding**.

And **St. Luke's**, all that **diaconal energy that Greg has poured into us all these years**, now **we've got to figure out a way to keep pouring it out on others in blessing**. **Greg showed us how**, but now, we've **got to fly on our own** and **figure out** how to **manifest our diaconal heart to one another** and **to the world**, ***particularly* to the poor, the oppressed, the sick, lonely, the widowed, the orphaned, and all those at the margins of society.** It is **our work** to **love God** and **love our neighbor** and **love ourselves**, **just like Greg has taught us and modeled**, that we, *like him*, **might make Christ's redemptive love known by *our* words and example**.

The **charge given to him** when he came to us 16 years ago is **now ours to claim**, and **carrying on his work**, will be the **best witness of our love** for **Greg**, and **the Lord *he* loves**, that we could give.

Greg, let me be clear, **I, and we, will miss you like CRAZY**. It's going to **feel just plain weird**, but we *know* that **you love us**, and *you've got to know* **how much we love you**, and **when we are *bound in love to one another***, ***that love*** **transcends time and space**.

You **may physically leave us**, but **you've worked your way into our hearts** and **made your home there**, and **we will carry you with us forever, just as you will carry us in yours**.

So, well done, good and faithful Deacon.

We'll **do our best to carry on your work**, to **be siblings in Christ**, and to **go in peace to love and serve the Lord with ALLELUIA JOY!** Amen.

The Rev. Cynthia K. R. Banks
St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Boone, NC
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