

The Rt. Rev. J. Scott Mayer - Opening Holy Eucharist and Ordination
2009 Annual Diocesan Convention
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Amarillo
September 11, 2009

We gather tonight to celebrate the Opening Holy Eucharist for the 51st Annual Convention of the Diocese of Northwest Texas, and for the ordination of Todd Baxley to the Sacred Order of Deacons. I want to take a moment to welcome all visitors – especially those who are not Episcopalians – who have joined us for this event. And Todd, we are grateful to take part in this occasion, and be a part of your life, as well.

Tonight's reading from Luke's Gospel sounds like something we might hear during the Season of Advent. "Be dressed for action, and have your lamps lit." "Blessed are those whom the master finds alert when he comes." "Be like those who are waiting for the master to return." Be ready. Be alert. Be dressed for action – how slaves should wait for the return of their master.

For the last thing a slave wants is to be caught napping or caught loafing by the master who returns home early. So we can imagine the anxiety, all day long, as a slave waits with a sense of foreboding – or even fear – for the master's return.

But tonight's story would shock the slaves, and for that matter the Mediterranean world 2000 years ago, and maybe shock us today, as Jesus says, THIS master – when he returns home – will have the slaves sit down at his own table, and the master will serve the slaves a meal.

THIS master feeds slaves. Slaves: the engine of the economy – machines, less than human; slaves, a cheap labor force with no other purpose, no other reason for existence, on the margins of society, if not humanity; slaves, overlooked as anything other than property, and in a total reversal this master feeds, this master serves slaves.

Jesus tells a story which points to the shocking, radical Gospel: the Good News of God's love for ALL people. If the culture sees you as an outcast, if the culture looks past you, if the culture simply uses you, if the culture sees you as less than human, and if the culture justifies all that with a false gospel claiming that being healthy, wealthy, and wise is evidence of God's favor, this story flips all that. The master serves the slave. That's Good News to the slave, obviously. And yet, it's Good News to the culture, as well.

For Jesus tells story after story saying that there is not one thing we can do to increase – or decrease – God's love for us. Show up for work early, or work only one hour at the end of the day – the pay is the same. Be holy, or be a sinner – the love doesn't change. The last shall be first, and the first shall be last – no justice in that.

It's not fair, and every story, every parable, every allegory, every teaching we hear which sounds like God is not fair is actually a proclamation of the Gospel of God's grace. God loves ALL of God's children without condition, and nothing we can do will change that. That's the Gospel which has the power to change lives, the power to raise the dead, and that's the Gospel the Church has been given to proclaim.

Allow me to share with you an experience I had in seminary – a story about Good News. In seminary everyone takes an in depth class in preaching called “homiletics” – taken from the word “homily.” Each week during the semester we would prepare a sermon (a homily) to be preached to our class, and our professor, and the camera.

One day when one of my classmates preached, he captured our attention with a good story. He proceeded to meet us “where we were” in terms of what we called the “human situation.” The human situation can be our brokenness, our sin, our grief, our limitations, our hopelessness, our pain.

As our homiletics professor always said, seminarians are good at finding the human situation within a gospel story. And on this occasion the student was on target. Our classmate nailed the human situation, the problem – whatever it was; I don’t remember. And then after that carefully crafted depiction of the human situation, he shifted gears to suggest what we, the people called by God, the Body of Christ, the Church ought to do about it ... all “in the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

The class sat there and waited for the professor’s comments. Silence. We knew the delivery of the homily had been effective. The preacher hooked us with a good story. He met us where we were, so it was relevant. He challenged us to respond in the Name of Christ. Dead Silence.

And from the back of the room, finally, with his booming voice, Professor Hilmer Krause bellowed, “Where’s the Good News?” (It was like the professor had been waiting for this opportunity.) “Where is the Good News? You just told me what’s wrong in the world, and what I ought to do about it. That’s not Good News. What I ought to do about something is not Good News. The Good News is what God has done, what God is doing, what God has promised.”

The Good News of God’s love is a shocking, radical departure from the perspective that we earn what we get, and get what we deserve; that if we will do this – or not do that – we will earn God’s favor; that if we are the most productive, we are the most valuable – the most accepted.

Jesus, on the other hand, calls the most despicable person in his culture, the tax collector, to follow him, and not only to follow him, but to lead. That’s Gospel.

Jesus touches the lepers, the untouchables. That’s Gospel.

Jesus breaks the sabbath to heal someone. Gospel.

Jesus washes the feet of his followers at the Last Supper. Gospel.

The Master serves the slave. Gospel.

Perhaps the question for us is this: How is that Gospel proclaimed? How is it revealed or conveyed? How can it be perceived? How can the slaves of the world – how can anyone – hear and believe this Good News?

Well, on the night before he dies Jesus gathers his followers in the Upper Room. And as John tells the story, after supper Jesus gets up from the table, pours water into a basin, and begins to wash the disciples’ feet. And he says, “I have set you an example, that you should do as I have done to you.”

Of course, Peter resists. He wants to deserve it, so Jesus says in essence, if you need to deserve it “then you won’t be a part of me.” It’s your choice, for this is a gift. It’s grace.

Jesus sets for us – his followers – an example. For sometimes, if not most of the time, the Good News is revealed IN THE FLESH. Sometimes God’s grace appears or arrives as one of you – and maybe on a clear day as all of us together.

It may be true what my professor said about the Gospel, that “what I ought to do about something is not Good News.” But it’s no less true that sometimes the Good News appears in the flesh – in and through the baptized, in and through you and me.

When you walk into the hospital room, or serve on the soup kitchen line, or sit and eat and visit with the so-called clients, or volunteer at an AIDS service clinic, or offer your presence at the State School, or help someone through the night at the Rehab [and the list could go on forever], to the one served YOU may be the icon, the window to the Good News of God’s love, grace, and acceptance.

The Anglican theologian, Austin Farrer, referred to us, the members of the Church, as “walking sacraments” – outward, visible representations of God’s grace. To the one served, you may be the outward, visible sign – the icon, the window to God’s love. “Where is the Good News?” Professor Krause demands to know. To the one served, it might be you or me in the flesh.

Tonight we are going to ordain a deacon. Here’s what the Prayer Book says about deacons. This is what the bishop says when addressing the ordinand:

“God now calls you to a special ministry of servanthood In the Name of Jesus Christ you are to serve all people, particularly the poor, the weak, the sick, the lonely.” “You are to interpret to the Church the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world.” “Your life and teaching are to show Christ’s people that in serving the helpless they are serving Christ himself.”

So the deacon is called to a special ministry of servanthood – not the designated servant on behalf of the rest of us, but rather, our icon, our window, our example, in serving others.

Todd, please stand. Through the wisdom and guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Church has called you to the Sacred Order of Deacons.

Todd, the truth is that people throughout this diocese, and especially the people of St. Andrews, see in you already the heart of a servant – the heart of a deacon. As another seminary professor, Charlie Cook, is prone to saying – quoting a familiar song from the ‘70s – “Oz didn’t give nothing to the Tin Man that he didn’t already have.” You have the heart, already. But hands will be laid on you anyway.

For to those who have served with you in various ministries, and perhaps especially those who have been served by you – just for one example, the children of Happy Camp – to them you are an icon to the Good News of God’s unconditional love, and complete and total acceptance. And today it is with gratitude, affection, and respect that we gather.

One thing I suggest you remember, as you are set aside for this specific ministry. When Jesus comes up out of the waters of his baptism, and the sky parts, and the dove descends, and the voice proclaims, "You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased," ... those words are spoken before Jesus heals the sick, before he feeds the 5000, before he suffers for the sake of the Gospel, before he is crucified, BEFORE Jesus accomplishes one thing in his ministry ... he is accepted.

And those words are meant for everyone here, and maybe especially for you as you follow this new call: "You are my beloved Son, Todd, with you I am well pleased." That's Gospel.

In the Name of the Holy Trinity, One God, in Whom we live and move and have our being. Amen.