

Jesus the Deacon Model

In this paper, I will argue that the ministry of Jesus more closely resembled the that of a contemporary vocational deacon than that of a modern day priest or apostle. I was inspired to write about this after reading the Jose Antonio Pagola's paper from *Jesus: An Historical Approximation*. I didn't read far before a lightbulb came on and I knew, without question, this description was a very much like the kind of ministries I have been doing, and hope to lead, encourage others, and take part in, as a vocational deacon.

First Century Deacons

In Acts 6, we read how the Apostles were having difficulty feeding those in need, specifically the Greek widows. The mention that they were Greek is significant, they were Gentile at a time when the church was expanding beyond Judaism. This is important because when Jesus encountered someone suffering, he cared for them, seldom stopping to find out if they were Jewish, much less what tribe.

We learn that seven deacons, including Stephen and Phillip, were ordained to “serve tables.” Although seven were ordained, only the works of Stephen and Phillip are recorded. What I always find ironic in Acts 6-8 is that Stephen and Phillip did much more than feed the widows. Though there aren't many details, I assume when Acts speaks of “wonders and signs,” it refers to caring for the ill, possessed, hungry, poor and otherwise marginalized, just as Jesus did.

First, we find Stephen doing many “wonders and signs,” and by inference, preaching until he was accused of prophesying against the temple, much the same as Christ had been. Though he defended himself with an elegant recounting the history of the Hebrew people, he is never-the-less, put to death by stoning, the beginning of a great persecution of Christ's followers

As a result of that persecution, Phillip made his way to Samaria where he preached, cast out demons, healed many people, and began baptizing in the name of Jesus Christ. (It remained for Apostles Peter and John to lay hands on those he baptized so they received the Holy Spirit.) Interesting parallel: Today a deacon *may* baptize, but the rubrics in the Book of Common Prayer specify that a Bishop or priest pray the, “Sustain them, O Lord in your Holy Spirit....” prayer at a later date (BCP p. 308 and 312). Acts 8 also tells how Phillip was chosen to proclaim the word to the Ethiopian eunuch who may symbolize spreading the story of the Christ beyond the Roman-

Hellenistic world.

So the ordained Biblical deacons served the marginalized and proclaimed the Good News to their world, just as Pagola tells us Jesus did. In fact, I maintain that there are only three chapters about deacons in Acts because Jesus had already set a standard for those who would take leadership in caring for the outsiders of society.

A Healer of Life

We see Jesus healing many physical illnesses and handicaps; contemporary deacons are seldom called upon to treat physical illness. Our world has well-trained physicians and all sorts of other medical personnel to do that. But there is also pain of the soul with or without physical illnesses, and it doesn't always fall into the medical category of psychiatry. When deacons are equipped with listening skills, they can alleviate the loneliness, fear, and anxiety. Some are called to work as hospital chaplains, thus working directly in concert with physical healers.

Pagola's point about Jesus touching lepers seemed very significant to me. Jesus was willing to, not only visit and tell them they were healed; he physically touched their sores to heal them. Most scholars believe Biblical leprosy encompassed skin disorders of various kinds, including leucoderma, vitiligo, psoriasis, eczema, yaws, sycosis or *tinea barbae*, ringworm of the scalp, or impetigo, as well as fungi and molds as well as as Hansen's disease. For ages, in Jesus world into the mid 20th century, leprosy and lepers were to be avoided at all cost. Proximity was viewed as dangerous, and touching, a sure way to contact the disease. So lepers were outcasts of the most severe kind. Today, we know leprosy (or any of the conditions named above) is not so easily spread, it generally responds to antibiotic treatment, and persons with leprosy can safely live with their families.

Yet even as we became enlightened about leprosy, we've made lepers or outcasts of others in our world. LGBTQA+ people, persons incarcerated, and immigrants are among those who are shunned by many. I know Jesus himself would have comforted any of these and helped them fit into a world that doesn't appear to want them, and he certainly calls his church to do the same. Some contemporary deacons are LGBTQA+ or allies, often exercising listening skills to heal feelings of rejection. The deacon at a nearby parish is deeply involved in prison ministry at our state women's facility. She visits there to lead prayer services and counsel, but equally importantly, she leads a group who provide for the reentry needs of the inmates when they are

released. I myself connect to immigrants and refugees. Maybe that's because I once lived on the economy in South Korea, and know how hard it is to negotiate a multitude of confusing customs with lack of language.

Defender of the Last

Pagola goes on to tell us that another large group of outcasts Jesus was drawn to is the poor or as Pagola defines them, the indigent. Jesus certainly acts as a deacon to them, setting a model for contemporary deacons. To begin with, he lives among them and shares their meager existence. What better manner and place to proclaim the the reign of God (as Pagola puts it) or the Kingdom of God (ala Marcus Borg)? This sets a difficult standard for many contemporary deacons. I don't know anyone, including myself, who is eager to go live in a homeless camp, but Jesus behavior certainly points out that we cannot minister to “the least of these” if someone doesn't go among them.

Dani Gabriel's Diakonia series on the Episcopal Cafe web site features a deacon who *does* live among the poor she serves. Her name is Nina Pickerrell and she lives in Bayview, probably the most resourced starved neighborhood in San Francisco. To visit Nina, Dani drove past piles of trash and dozens of crumbling RVs where people shelter. The neighborhood is predominantly African American, with the most violence in the city, and almost entirely ignored. Nina directs Bayview Mission out of her home. In the 1990s, she moved into the house her grandparents had purchased in the 1950s, and began making big changes. She cleaned up the yard and replanted the vegetable garden to give the neighborhood children a safe place to play. She cleared the clutter from the garage in order to set up a food pantry that now serves over 400 families every Monday. She tidied up the old garden room in the basement to house a children's library that includes over 2000 books. She did a free summer camp for neighborhood kids and a Gun Buy Back. “We even got an assault rifle!” she exclaims “We're going to do it again. Three times as big.”

A second inspiring story from that same series is about a deacon appropriately named Stephen, who salvages, repairs, and provides free bikes for folks who have a ways to go to work and school and no money for transportation. Even if they do have money the transportation is not that accessible. There's not that many buses in his community, and they're not that frequent. I think that's what Jesus did; he saw a need, figured out how to fill it.