

EPIPHANY LUTHERAN CHURCH
ORDER OF ST STEPHEN, DEACON

March 12, 2011

Setting apart of deacons

Isaiah 58 : 1 – 12
John 15 : 9 - 17

When I was a boy, I was really into church.

**Now, I don't quite know where that came from.
My family wasn't the church-going kind, my parents rarely
went to church, maybe for Christmas and Easter, if that.**

**It was my best friend in elementary school who got me
hooked on church.
His name was Matthias, but we called him Mias for short.**

**He came from an arch conservative Roman Catholic family
that had just relocated to our town when we met in second
grade.**

**Soon after, Mias joined the altar boys at our local Roman
Catholic church.**

**I was Roman Catholic, too, of course.
I grew up in the Black Forest in the southern part of Germany
where to this day 90% of the population is Catholic (as
opposed to the "Lutheran" North), and so I begged my mom
to let me go, too.**

**These were the days before the Second Vatican Council
when all the masses were said in Latin, and so, as a brand
new altar boy,**

I had to learn all these Latin prayers by heart.

It's funny what you remember after all these years, but I can still recite the long opening prayer that the altar boys would whisper as they approached the altar at the beginning of mass. It was a confession of sin, and it went like this:

**Confiteor Deo omnipotente
Beatae Mariae semper virgini
Beato Michaeli Archangelo
Beato Iohanni Baptistae
Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa.**

Impressive, my Latin, don't you think?

Of course, with my luck, two years later the Second Vatican Council came along and the church changed from Latin into the local language ... and so I had to re-learn all these prayers in German.

I really got into all of that, and I was good at it. I became an expert at swinging the incense bowl in exactly the proscribed manner and in taking the altar book from one side of the altar to the other during high mass at just the right time (I dropped it only once in all those years!)

People said I should be a priest someday (they'd love if they'd know that I am a bishop now and a Lutheran one at that!)

I got into it, in fact, years after my friend Mias had dropped out of the altar boys, I was still going strong, and I ended up as the senior altar boy, the leader of the pack who would train the younger ones, when I was 16 and 17.

**By then, though,
my church career had taken an unexpected turn.
Something had happened to me and church, and soon after I
was the one who dropped out.**

**In my late teens and early 20s, I didn't go to church at all,
didn't pray, didn't care,
told people I wasn't sure there even was a God, and if there
was one, he sure didn't seem to care about all the evil in the
world,**

**To me, church seemed so ... irrelevant,
so totally separated from the rest of the world, so removed
and ignorant, so dis-connected from what was going on in
the world and in my life.**

**In Vietnam, American bombs were falling on innocent
children ... and we were happily swinging the incense thingie
to and fro!**

**In a country called Biafra, a country we had never heard of
before, a million people starved to death that year ... but we
were pre-occupied with making sure that the mass book got
taken from one side of the high altar to the other at just the
right time!**

**My own life was in an uproar. I had all kinds of questions
about life and love and sex, wondering whether this would be
the weekend when I'd kiss my first girl ... but in church, we
dressed up in funny little skirt and starched collars and
rattled off prayers we did not understand in German anymore
than we had understood them in Latin.**

In short, church didn't make sense anymore.

I think about my career as an altar boy every time I read the 58th chapter of Isaiah.

In this chapter, you see, the prophet speaks about what it is God expects of God's people ... and how sometimes God's people can get so caught up in their religious ceremonies, they forget what faith is all about, kind of like I got all caught up in being an altar boy.

Now, we started reading at verse 6, but to get the whole story, you really have to start in the beginning, with verse 1. So here it is:

Isaiah 58 : 1 – 5

You see, here is God, through the prophet, describing how it is that God's people have gone astray.

In this part of Isaiah – theologians like to call it Third Isaiah because it is a distinct part of the book – the prophet writes at a time when things are well with Israel. The Israelites have returned from exiles, the temple has been rebuilt, prosperity is growing, things are well with Israel.

And before you know it, this well-being leads to complacency as it so often does (you know what I'm talking about, don't you?)

The people of Israel are enjoying the good life so much they are neglecting their religious duties in the temple.

Oh, they are saying their prayers alright but in reality they are doing the minimum required and serving their own interest.

They are fasting alright ... but the fasting makes them crabby, and they take advantage of other people.

They show up for the temple worship ... barely ... but their heart is not in it and their worship has become routine (now do you know what I am talking about?)

And all the while, the Israelites have forgotten what it is God really wants them to do:

**Here is how I want you to worship me, God has Isaiah say:
Loose the bonds of injustice and let the oppressed go free.
Break every yoke,
Share your bread with the hungry, clothe the naked.
Take care of the homeless.**

That's the kind of worship I want.

**I don't care about your fancy worship, God says,
not about your fine organs or your beautiful stoles,
not about the finely crafted order of worship nor the
intricately put together bulletin,
not about that hugely inspiring sermon nor the well
rehearsed anthem.
Keep those handmade banners and stop the chancel
prancing in beautifully adorned vestments.**

**Instead, God says,
go out there and be the church where it really counts.**

Church, you see, doesn't really happen in here, inside these four walls.

Oh, I like a good worship service as much as the next bishop, but the truth is that real worship, true worship, honest worships happens out there:

**In the alleys of Baltimore
In the apartment complexes of the Beltway towns
In the cul-de-sacs of the suburbs
In the farm communities of western Maryland
In the streets of the neighborhood.**

True worship happens when God's people feed the hungry and clothe the naked and stand up for the oppressed.

What we do in here is fine, it's meant to feed us and to build us up ... but it is done for a purpose, not for its own sake: It's meant to get us ready so we can go and be the church in the world.

A friend of mine from Chicago – her name is Mary Nelson, she founded an incredible social ministry organization called Bethel New Life – Mary talks about the church and says that the church is a gas station.

A gas station where we come once a week to fill up our spiritual gas tanks.

I think she is right.

I don't know about you, but in my life, by the time I get to Friday, my spiritual energy level is getting pretty low, my gas tank is near empty, and by Sunday morning I kind of sputter into church on the last few fumes that are left in there.

**And so we come to the gas station to fill up,
we come to the fountain to recharge,
we come to the table to be fed
we come and we refill our spiritual gas tanks so we can go
out once again and do what God is calling us to do:**

**Loose the bonds of injustice and let the oppressed go free.
Break every yoke,
Share your bread with the hungry, clothe the naked.
Take care of the homeless.
Be a sign of God's hope and God's love and God's justice to
all those around us and to the world.**

**How appropriate that we would set apart three new deacons
for this work today!**

**You see, a deacon is a servant ... that's where the word
comes from, the Greek, *diakonia*, meaning service ...**

**And a deacon of St. Stephen is set apart - maybe a better
word would be "charged with" - to serve God's people for the
sake of the world.**

**If you think, Rick and Doug and Robin, if you think you are
being set apart for fancy church positions so you can dress
up in bright stoles and play church, think again.**

**And you pastors out there, if you think you are ordained into
the Ministry of Word and Sacrament so you can do fancy
liturgies to your heart's content, think again and look to
these deacons as an example of what it means to serve God
in the world.**

**You see, deacons are ordinary people (as are, I hate to tell
you, pastors).**

Well, in this case, we have a park ranger, an IT expert for an insurance company, an administrative assistant in a church office – deacons are ordinary people ... but your setting apart today, Rick and Doug and Robin, means that God is calling you to do extraordinary things.

God is calling you to do extraordinary things:

As a chaplain at Fort McHenry

As a pastoral assistant here at Epiphany,

As a hospitality and visitation minister at Our Savior in Lansdowne ...

God is calling you ordinary folks to do extraordinary things ... and to do these extraordinary things out in the world where true worship happens.

**Diakonia means service, diakonia means care.
and so “deacon” is just a fancy term for “servant”**

...and that is what God is calling you into today, service!

Jesus speaks about this too when he commands us to love one another.

There is no greater love, Jesus says, than to lay down one’s life for the sake of one’s friends.

St. Stephen knew something about this because he, the ultimate servant, did give his life.

Martyrdom may not be required of you, Rick and Doug and Robin.

It’s possible, I suppose, that you might be asked to make this ultimate sacrifice, but probably not.

However, Jesus wants nothing short of your life, all of it. Your energy, your commitment, your passion, your time and your talent.

Jesus wants it all.

“Rick, you did not choose me but I chose you,” Jesus says to you today,

“Doug, I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.”

“Robin, as the Father has loved me, so I have loved you.”

What a privilege, what a joy is yours today as with your promises you bind yourselves to Jesus and the life that he brings.

Go, bear fruit, live, follow and serve in obedience to God and for the sake of the world!

And that, my brothers and sisters, is the Good News for you this afternoon, and to that, let the people of God say: AMEN.