

Pentecost 10 July 28, 2024 proper 11

Tomorrow is the 50th anniversary of the ordination of women to the priesthood in the Episcopal Church. In Philadelphia, at the Church of the Advocate, eleven courageous women stepped forward and took their priestly vows before a congregation and a bishop, the bishops hands were laid on them and they began their ministries as priests in our Church. There were no canons authorizing the ordination of women as priests, so this ordination was term “irregular,”but thank God they took this brave step, because in doing so they brought the reconciling and redeeming love of Jesus to life, breaking down this patriarchally imposed injustice and opening a new day for our Church. While a few people left the Episcopal Church, claiming that women priests violated God’s law, I believe they were sorely misguided in that outlook, and the proof, as they say, is in the pudding: women have served as some of the best priests in the service of our church, no doubt about it. Our Diocese has even played its own part in this story by bringing in late Mary Adelia McLeod to serve as the first female Diocesan Bishop in the nation when she was consecrated in Vermont on a snowy All Saints Day in 1993. Also in this regard, I was always proud that the last parish I served in New York, St. Mary’s Church in West Harlem, sponsored two of the first eleven women ordained to the priesthood, Carter Heywood and Emily Hewitt, both women who went on with great distinction to serve the church, and started on this way by a little parish in West Harlem. Fairly remarkable. So as we prepare to celebrate this most auspicious anniversary tomorrow, as we give God thanks for the many ways women have shown Christ’s love, in undertaking priestly orders, in leadership and in great faith, we also look forward, asking God to help us to continue to be faithful, to continue to break artificial barriers, to continue to lift the gifts of ministry in all to the service of the Risen Christ in the days to come. Thanks be to God!

Prayer: Most merciful and glorious God; this morning we heard of your love being ever more that we can imagine; touch the imaginations of our souls that we may love as we are loved. This we ask in the Name of Jesus our savior and friend. Amen.

The story of David and Bathsheba sounds almost like some sort of contemporary story that could be the headlines about one of our political leaders, the philandering, the cover up and the lies. Certainly not one of David’s finer moments! It does show, however, the depth of human deceit and mendacity, and it is especially an indictment of David, the newly anointed king of Israel, the one with a responsibility to shepherd the people in the midst of the dire threats they face, not to simply indulge

himself, not to be one who uses his power and position simply to feed his carnal appetites. Not exactly a good or edifying example.

But of course, the opposite example is given to us in the Gospel lesson this morning, the long reading from John's gospel: Jesus has a large crowd following, out into the wilderness and asks a very practical question, "Where are ew going to buy bread for these people to eat?" And Philip quickly does the math, figures out that this is going to cost them a pretty penny, but totally ignores the fact that they are out in the wilderness: there's no Hannafords or PriceChopper or any other supermarket in sight! Andrew figures out that it is best to make do with what they have: a boy has five barley loaves and two fish (I always love the specificity of things like this John telling of the story of Jesus; a specificity that makes you feel that the writer was right there in the midst of the action), so five loaves and two fish; that's a start. And we know how it goes: Jesus has the five thousand sit while he blesses these loaves, and then given to all, as much as they wanted; and afterwards the disciples gathered up the leftover bits a fill twelve baskets. Yes, a miracle, but one which has been reenacted many times over in church basements and other places where people share what they have and quick find out that it is an abundance that they are blessed by. This story concludes with Jesus walking on the water, over the wind tossed seas, and though the disciples were terrified, but Jesus brings them calm; Jesus bids them not to fear.

I think that both these stories from John have a good deal to teach us about our faith, an especially in light of the important anniversary we celebrate tomorrow. In the feeding of the crowd, Jesus shows us not only that what we have is important, even if it seems as insignificant as five loaves and two fish, and that God blesses this and continues to nourish and strengthen us. And in the church of course, one overlooked gift for so long was the ministry of women, overlooked, of course, because of our malicious patriarchal systems, but a great gift to share and an abundance that has brought us so much, so much more than we could ever imagine or deserve! Just amazing to me, just miraculous, truly, a miracle how the ministry of women has transformed and opened the church, given us a deeper sensitivity and faith, given us a powerful example of the deep and life giving love of God. Also, as I mentioned earlier, tomorrow when we mark a half century of this gift on this anniversary, we remember the courage the Philadelphia 11 had on that day as they came forward to take up God's call on their lives. But I believe the story of Jesus I our gospel lesson today takes this even deeper: Jesus does not tell his friends to have courage; no Jesus says, "Do not be afraid." An imperative. A

command. To have courage is to stand up and stand firm in the face of fear. But Jesus says, "Do not be afraid," to leave fear behind and to live into a new reality, a new horizon based on god's goodness and grace, not on human deceit and mendacity... Jesus' command to us is to open our souls to the reality of this new vision. We see in the courage of those strong women who stood up in Philadelphia 50 years ago, courage that changed the reality for the church, but it was not only standing up the fear, but moving beyond fear, seeking to make a new reality for the church in the priestly ordination of women. We now live in that new reality first taken up half a century ago in Philadelphia, we now live in a church more open to show God's love and God mercy to all.

So today we give thanks for this significant anniversary, but most of all we give thanks to Go in our own day, for the grace to love others as we are loved, to undertake the mission of care and to give God glory for this new reality in which we live. May we be ever strengthened to live more deeply in this faith, may we be ever ready to give as we have been given, that all might share with us the love of God. Thanks be to god for this great and amazing grace and thanks be to Christ for opening for us this way of love. Amen.