

John 3:14-21

Jesus said, "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

Transformers

During one of my years as a Lawrence House intern, the priest, Rev. Tanya Wallace, who runs the program said something so simple yet so profound.

Something that I feel I had been searching for a long time to know.

She said

God loves you exactly as you are and loves you too much to let you stay that way.

Let me repeat that -

God loves you exactly as you are and loves you too much to let you stay that way.

In today's readings, we hear of God's mercy and love.

It's present in the Hebrew Bible scripture with God sending poisonous snakes as consequence and

still providing a way to repent, be accountable, and turn back to God.

In the Psalm, we are told of the cries of distress and the deliverance from it, being healed and saved.

The New Testament reading speaks on the ways

we have turned from God repeatedly to pursue our own selfish desires and how God's grace has made transformation endlessly possible and how we can take part in that through God.

And that similar refrain of our own agency and action is marked in the Gospel, as we are reminded that we are welcomed to life eternal.

God loves you exactly as you are and loves you too much to let you stay that way.
Life eternal means chance after chance to turn towards God.
It's the three simultaneous truths -
God loves us, knows each of us to be human,
and loves us into transformation.
We get to partake in that transformation together.
We will be transformed in the midst of each other,
in the work that we do, in our honesty and confession.
And we will continue to be human,
fumbling at times - inevitably faltering.
Still we are loved and given possibility for further transformation.
We might even believe we are aligning ourselves with God while doing harm.
History has those stories, the church has its own memories of that.
Yet we can confess, reconcile, and turn again to God and those truths.

It reminds me of the diaconate's history and its current shape.
The diaconate has its foundational truths, too -
witnessing, interpreting, and being a prophetic voice to the world's needs back to the church.
Deacons preach the gospel, lead in prayers of the people, set the table
and with the dismissal remind us that we are meant to be of the church out in the world.
The diaconate has changed and shifted just as the world and church does - being made anew.
With its scriptural roots, it's remained both tied to that foundation
yet dynamic throughout its iterations or what are often referred to as waves.
And in these waves, we can observe some problematic themes.

As Suzanne Watson Epting writes in *Unexpected Consequences: the Diaconate Renewed*,
"women who felt called to dedicate their lives to full time work in the church. They could enter life in a
religious community, pursue certification as a professional church worker, or become a deaconess." (page
20)

Similar limitations were true for indigenous people and people of color as they were barred from many
church roles and orders.

When we look at the waves in a fuller light,
we can notice how these ministries still shape the diaconate today.
How it was both a designation for those barred from other forms of work as well as work that uplifted
and transformed communities and the deacons themselves.
I invite us to take a deeper dive into this history to be able to understand and honor its complexity.

Indigenous people and missionaries are what Ormonde Plater categorizes as the first wave.
Deaconesses followed as the second wave and
were "set apart" from other deacons until the canons changed in 1970.
The third wave was the perpetual deacons, oftentimes acting as pastoral associates
and were in response to the growing numbers in church during the 1950s and 60s.

With the 1970s, the diaconate underwent a different type of transformation.

I should mention now that all of the waves prior to this point and thereafter are not a clean cut shift, rather they flow into one another which is why the term wave is so poignant.

Yet the 1970s were truly a time of transition for the diaconate and how it was lived out, especially with the Book of Common Prayer revision and the deaconesses being designated as deacons.

While still holding onto its foundational truth,

this time period reinvigorated the questions of what it has meant,

what it looks like, and what it could entail to be a deacon.

It has both confounded and inspired people.

The following waves were an exploration of the ministries that the diaconate could expand to,

as was the case in the fifth wave in which is often known for the “what’s your diaconal calling” question.

Its focus during the sixth wave was on interpretive and prophetic elements of the call.

The seventh wave and ones to come integrate these while continuing to transform itself, the church, and the world.

And it’s why Chris and I are here today.

We have seen the liveliness of this order.

The history of it might leave a bitter taste in people’s mouth.

The complexity might leave some uncertain to know their calling,

or a bit perplexed at what *exactly* the diaconate is.

Those are realities that can be true alongside its potential and foundational truths.

Its different shapes speak to the power God has in transforming the world, the church, and us.

At its best, the diaconate is living out God’s transformative, gracious love.

This love has a regenerative, cyclical nature as the ministries of deacons, in turn, change the world.

They don’t push their own agenda or have an individual goal in sight.

In fact, students with Province 1 School for Deacons take a training in community organizing

to encourage us to be part of the communities we are serving with.

Whether it be immediate needs such as through feeding ministries

or taking on more long-term, systemic injustice by hosting dialogues on policy change,

deacons are moving with the world.

It is a vow to call the church back to the promise it’s made to God and God’s people.

The diaconate and us as individuals continue to have the potential to grow

while recalling that we are already so loved.

This is not because of our individual nature but as it is written in Ephesians:

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.”

We are accepting God’s gift and living out the thanksgiving for it.

So I ask you today:

How have you been transformed?

How are you encouraging your communities to grow?

What does love have to do with that?

And remember

God loves you exactly as you are and loves you too much to let you stay that way.