

To all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak

Recently, the North American Association for the Diaconate commissioned an icon of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples. Jesus is bending over, reaching to wash the feet of one disciple while the other disciples gather behind him watching with awe and curiosity.

Jesus, as deacon, as servant, is showing his friends how they must serve each other, even with the lowliest of tasks.

A number of years ago, I found another foot washing picture. I was in a bookstore and as I came around one of the bookshelves, I came face to face with a large picture. It was a business man in his white, long-sleeved shirt and suspenders and red and black striped tie and blue pinstriped pants, sitting in his red leather desk chair, his head in his hand, looking utterly exhausted. Beside him are his desk and the phone with all its buttons, a globe, papers ... the computer sits behind him.

He is alone...

By his feet is a shadowy figure – Jesus – gently holding his foot over a basin of fresh clear water, a pitcher beside the basin, the towel in his hand, washing the tired man's foot. He is unaware of Jesus' presence. But Jesus is aware of his deep need.

Jesus, as deacon, washing the feet of his friend, is invisible to him.

That picture hangs on my office wall, right by the door so that I see it every time I leave my office, and it reminds that although I am a priest, I am called to serve God and to serve God's people, even when that service is invisible. I am called to remember God's words to Jeremiah: **To all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak.**

We are participating in a wonderful celebration today. But we must remember that diaconal ministry is often invisible ministry. Those disciples we heard about in the Gospel who were arguing about who was going to be the greatest among them forgot about that. Clearly, they were more concerned about their visibility.

Jesus wasted no time in reminding them that he was among them as one who serves. And visible or invisible, we all have a share in diaconal ministry.

Some are God's servants in the world – teachers, nurses, doctors, accountants, lawyers, waiters, bartenders, administrative assistants, trash collectors, bus drivers, computer programmers. The work we do each day as baptized children of God in God's world calls us to be servants of God's people in this world.

Some are called and chosen as Stephen was called and chosen, to a unique ministry as deacon in the church. These are vocational or permanent deacons. Ordained to bridge the church and the world, they bring the needs and concerns of the world into the church and the call of the church out into the world. We heard about the calling of Stephen in the lesson from Acts we heard. Some among the apostles were chosen to be servants so others could devote themselves to a ministry of preaching and prayer. Note that those who were chosen to serve had to be of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom. Not just anyone, it seems, can be a worthy servant. Note also what it says at the end of the passage: They chose the seven who would serve, beginning with Stephen and **These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands upon them. And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.** It seems that it took the ministry of these deacons to make it possible for the priests to be obedient to the faith.

We all work together. We all need one another's ministry. It's important that we not forget that.

So some are called as Stephen was called to a lifetime of service as a vocational deacon. Others are called as transitional deacons, so that as priest they will be true servant leaders. I have heard a priest quoted as saying "On Sundays I do priestly ministry. During the week, I do diaconal ministry." Another colleague of ours in this diocese has said that "If I can't be a deacon, I certainly can't be a priest." I was ordained to the diaconate twenty years ago this week. I have no doubt that my ministry as a priest was deeply formed by the year I spent as a deacon. And it continues to be formed by the diaconal ministry that surrounds me.

One of the great blessings of our diocese is the abundance of diaconal ministry we participate in. And yes, we all have a share in diaconal ministry.

First of all, it's no accident that the lesson we heard from Jeremiah is one of the lessons to be chosen for the ordination of a deacon. Jeremiah the prophet is called to speak with a prophetic voice. He shrinks from this obligation saying "I'm only a youth." And God replies, **"Do not say, 'I am only a youth'; for to all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak."**

The voice of the deacon is a powerful, prophetic voice, calling the world to pay attention to God's call for the world. Sorry, Matt, you cannot say "I am only a youth." God is going to put God's words in your mouth.

Lest the rest of us think we are off the hook because it's Matt who is being ordained today, I believe we must all pay attention to God's call to serve, to God's call to be the prophetic voice responding to desperate need in our world and responding to the cry for justice that rings out across God's globe.

And yes, we do have a diocese that is overflowing with diaconal ministry from the border of Maryland to the border of New York, from Bangor to Bedford.

So many of our parishes are diaconal parishes, responding to need and crying out for justice. Our parishes have ministries that feed the hungry, from breakfast programs to soup kitchens to food collections. Our parishes participate with Habitat for Humanity, providing homes for families, and they've been to Virginia and to the Gulf Coast to build and rebuild homes. They have clothing banks, Stephen's Ministry, Eucharistic Visitors and Pastoral Visitors, homes to serve the elderly. Our parishes reach out to the community with programs for children and youth, vacation bible school, a summer arts program, summer long day programs, nursery schools and a very fine accredited day school, St. Stephen's Episcopal School, all of which exist not for the children in the parish but for the children in the community, the youth in the neighborhood. Our parishes reach out to serve the people in their communities, to respond to great need with the annual National Neighborhood Night Out, by cleaning up trash in city streets, with Sycamore House ministries where young adults live in intentional Christian Community while serving the neighborhoods they live in.

Some of these parishes have their diaconal ministry acknowledged because they are Jubilee parishes. Some will yet become Jubilee parishes. ALL of our parishes need to be Jubilee parishes. All of our parishes

need to hear that prophetic voice of the deacon saying “There is great need here. God is calling us to pay attention. God is calling us to be God’s hands and heart in a world groaning with need.”

When God says, **to all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak**, then we go where God sends us and we speak what God commands us to speak.

Yes, we are living through some difficult times. It is easy to focus inward on our own needs and the shortages at our own tables, but it is even more important in these difficult times that we pay attention to diaconal ministry in our midst, that we pay attention, not just to our own need, but the need of “the other” among us. It is in these times, when so many of us are sitting with our head in our hands, as that business man in my picture sits, we need to receive the comforting presence of Jesus at our feet. It is in these times, when so many of us feel the need of the world, that we need to sit as Jesus sat, kneel as Jesus knelt, and wash the feet of “the other”, as invisible as that may be.

(Ask Matt to stand) Matt, you are going to be a fine priest one day. The priest calls the people together and in the priest’s hands and heart is the sacramental ministry of the church. The deacon sends the people out, fed by the sacrament, to be God’s hands and heart in the world.

You are about to take the vows of a deacon. Pay attention to those vows. Be a faithful deacon so that you can indeed be that fine priest. You are being called to a special ministry of servanthood. Honor that servanthood. You are to interpret to the church the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world. That’s a huge task. There are many needs and concerns out there. There are also desperate hopes. Tell the church about them! The people you serve will be blessed by your ministry. Go, Matt, and be God’s hands and heart in the world. And, as a servant of the people of God and as God’s servant, speak God’s words to the world.

Matt, if I can leave one thought with you today, it is this: Pay Attention! Never forget your call to servanthood. Pay Attention! Never forget God’s words to Jeremiah: **To all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak.**