

A sermon preached by the Rev. Robert L. Hart, June 21, 2009, Pentecost 3, Proper 7, Job 38: 1-11, Psalm 107: 1-3, 23-32, 2 Corinthians 6: 1-13, Mark 4: 35-41

+In the Name of God who laid the foundations of the earth, who brings us salvation through the grace of Jesus Christ and who calls us in the Spirit to the ministry of peace. Amen.

St. Paul who could be a somewhat prickly fellow seems to have discovered an equally prickly group of people within the Christian congregation in the Greek city of Corinth. He had at least one uncomfortable and awkward visit there before he wrote the words we heard this morning. If nothing else we learn that even back in the days of the earliest church, congregational life wasn't all that much different from ours.

What today's reading portrays is Paul justifying his ministry. It's one way he appeals to the Christians in Corinth, by demonstrating how he sees his ministry. He tells them he has no worldly or material advantage from his labors. What he's doing is highlighting his virtues and strengths by also reminding the Corinthian congregation of the adversities he's faced.

Paul tells them his heart is wide open to the congregation and asks them much as a father to children for them to open their hearts to him. One can only guess whether this made the impact he hoped for. The wider Church certainly found his words convincing and preserved his letters to the Church in Corinth for all time.

I'm moved by several parts of this passage. But what immediately caught my eye earlier this week were these words, "... that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way." For you see the word we translate as ministry is in the Greek original *diakonia*, from which we derive the word for the order of ministry we call "deacons." Then in the same sentence Paul describes himself as an Apostle as one of the "servants of God." Here again in Greek we have *os theou diakonoi*. That same word is used.

Deacon comes from the Greek word for servant or even as someone who waits on tables. And this is the word and concept Paul uses to describe his ministry as an Apostle. You could translate the passage this way. "...that no fault may be found with our diaconate, but as deacons of God we have commended ourselves in every way."

God is good in many ways. God is good to the preacher when such a text is provided on the very Sunday we celebrate the ministry, the diaconate, of Deacon Joyce Treppa. Paul provides us with an insight of what Christian ministry is all about and Joyce and Jon have been living examples of it.

In ancient times servants were low down on the hierarchy of society. Often they were slaves which put them off the bottom of the scale entirely. That both Jesus and Paul used this image to describe themselves and what they were about is very telling. I know that Joyce would say to us that diaconate is a description of us all as Christian people and not just a special order of ministry. We are called as ministers, servants, to do the work of Christ in the world.

I have witnessed as I know you have how Joyce has exemplified the ministry of service. She and Jon have singly and together exercised the calling God has given them. Joyce's work as a hospice chaplain, her visits to bring communion to the homebound, her pastoral calling to those in hospital are summed up Sunday by Sunday as she waits on the Table of the Lord – placing the bread and filling the cup. Here she symbolizes the work of the servant. During the rest of the week it is her ministry.

Joyce and Jon taught the Rite 13 class. Jon has scheduled the lectors and Eucharistic ministers and served on the Vestry. Most of all I will remember the day I watched the two of them weed and plant in the flower gardens formed by the stone frames that used to hold the stained glass windows of the church. It seemed a picture of the level of devotion and commitment that Joyce and Jon share.

As an ordained deacon Joyce serves as a living example of the ministry, the diaconate, we all share. When we see her at work on Sunday or feel the impact of her service during the week we are meant to be reminded of our own calling. Joyce as a deacon raises up ministry and presents the needs of the world to the congregation. She doesn't do ministry so that we don't have to. She is an ordained deacon to encourage us to be better servants of Christ ourselves.

When a deacon is ordained the bishop reminds the ordinand, "God now calls you to a special ministry of servanthood... [...] ... you are to serve all people, particularly the poor, the weak, the sick, and the lonely. [...] At all times, your life and teaching are to show Christ's people that in serving the helpless they are serving Christ himself." This is what Joyce is called to do. This is what she does. This is what she will continue to do. We will miss her presence at Christ Church, Detroit, but we are better ministers and servants because of you, Joyce. We are profoundly grateful. We wish for you and Jon every blessing.

Paul had to justify his ministry to the congregation in Corinth. He wrote so that they would find "no fault" with his ministry as a servant of God. We at Christ Church could never find fault with your diaconate, Joyce. You are a servant of God and have been so here, faithfully and with grace and good humor. Our hearts are wide open to you. We are a community of faith, a living body in Christ Jesus, and therefore nothing can separate us in the love that has knit us together in the first place.

On this day as we celebrate Joyce and Jon and give thanks for their presence and ministry among us, we renew our commitment to be ministers, servants of our God.