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Christ Church Gardiner
Lent 5

In the parish news a couple of weeks ago, I shared the story of the Philadelphia 11 in honor of Women's History Month. The Philadelphia 11 are the women who, in July of 1974, were ordained to the priesthood at Church of the Advocate in Philadelphia. This was remarkable because just a year before, at the General Convention of the Episcopal Church, women had been denied ordination to the priesthood. And nothing had changed regarding women's ordination in that year.

But these eleven women, and others like them, were tired of waiting. They had tried the legislative routes within the church, but they were weary of being put off so that the Church could continue to "study the matter."

Choosing to be ordained without the blessing of General Convention carried great risk in that the women could be deposed, in other words, permanently barred from the priesthood in the future, and possibly any role in the Church at all.

Their ordination was an historic moment in the Church. Knowing the story of these women is important to understanding our church history. But as one of you pointed out to me, the press release from July 31, 1974 that I shared in the parish newsletter failed to name any but two of these women.

The news release did name the three male retired or resigned Bishops who performed the ordination, the male Harvard professor who preached the sermon, and several of the male Bishops who opposed the ordinations, including the Presiding Bishop at that time. But it never named the eleven women who answered the call of ordination to the priesthood on that day.

In light of this error of omission, because we know that words matter, that being called and named matters, I would like to name those women for you today and talk about why we should remember them and how their actions, while disobedient to church law, were still obedient to serving Christ.

The Philadelphia 11 are: Merrill Bittner, Alla Bozarth-Campbell, Alison Cheek, Emily Hewitt, Carter Heyward, Suzanne Hiatt, Marie Moorefield, Jeannette Picard, Betty Bone Schiess, Katrina Swanson, and Nancy Wittig.

These women had already been ordained to the diaconate, a role open to women at that time. As deacons, they would have made vows during their ordinations to obey their bishops and other ministers with authority over them and their work.

So how did they decide that the faithful thing for them to do was to disobey their bishops and those with authority over them by being ordained to the priesthood? Obedience can be a tricky thing, right? Where do truth and what is right play into our responsibilities to those who have authority over us? When is *civil disobedience* the right answer?

Jesus knew something about this. He constantly defied the Jewish leadership with his words and actions. But he believed that truth was on his side. He believed that the truth he shared would liberate people. But he was not always understood. And he often made the Jewish leadership feel threatened.

Today's Gospel takes us to Jerusalem, just days before the crucifixion of Jesus. The crowds gathered around him did not fully understand his preaching, but they were fascinated and hopeful and wanted to know more. Even the Greeks, or those who were not Jewish, were attracted to this message of Jesus who preached salvation for the whole world.

In that mysterious way that Jesus had, he told those who came to hear him that they would have to be born again, born from above, and that they would need to lose their lives in order to gain eternal life. In other words, they were going to have to decide what in their lives was worth living for and dying for. Two thousand years later, Christ's followers are still trying to figure out what we are willing to live and die for, at least metaphorically.

Alison Cheek, one of the Philadelphia 11, wondered about this question of what is worth living and dying for when she got the call from Nancy Wittig who was helping to coordinate the ordinations in Philadelphia. She said in an interview asking about her decision to join the group of eleven,

"It seemed a bit dramatic, but I think the metaphors of life and death were a recognition that I must die to much of what I clung to and loved if I were to live out the values I believed in most radically and deeply. I had a choice, but I knew that if I chose not to go to Philadelphia my integrity would not be intact." In other words, living out her Gospel values led her to that act of civil disobedience toward church authorities.

Carter Heyward, another of the eleven, insisted at Cheek's memorial service that the ordinations had never been simply about themselves and what they wanted. The women had always believed that their ordinations were a stand for the marginalized everywhere. That they were not, even at first, in Heyward's words, "about the ordination of a few privileged white women to the priesthood of an historically privileged white church. The Philadelphia ordination was a wake-up call to the church to get moving and do what Jesus of Nazareth did: stand with the marginalized, advocate for those left out, speak up for those without voice, accompany those seeking liberation from injustice, and embody courage in the face of cruelty, lies, bullying or violence." In other words Heyward said, "to shake some sense into the church."

The ordinations of these eleven women did shake up the church. And it forced the Church to choose the values that it was willing to live and die for. Episcopal leadership in our country reacted in a variety of ways—some were supportive, but many were critical and even angry. Even after the General Convention voted to change the canons of the church so that the ordination of women was allowed, the road was not easy for women in the priesthood. Entire dioceses refused to ordain women. This continued discomfort with women as priests, made it difficult for those ordained to find jobs in parish ministry. Many of the Bishops of the Philadelphia 11 refused to help find them work. A few of those women first ordained left the church out of frustration.

Nevertheless, the courage of these women broke upon the church. Not overnight, but in a way that is continuing to change us, forcing us to look at who is being marginalized and left out of our communities.

Jesus calls us to repent of our sin—our selfishness, our way of living as if we are the center of the world instead of God. But it does not mean that we should become doormats. It does not mean that our desire to live fully into what God dreams for us is a selfish desire.

The Philadelphia 11 were not being selfish by forcing the Church to face its discrimination against them. They were not being selfish in their civil disobedience against the authorities over them. Their persistence to live out their dreams of doing God's work as priests made possible the dreams of other women and others in the church who were marginalized. In our Presiding Bishop's newest book, *Love is the Way*, Curry speaks of the importance of dreams. He writes "Dreams are love's visions—the boundless faith that the world can be remade to look more like what God hopes for his creation."

The dreams of these women were love's visions. They believed that the Church could be remade to look more like what God hoped for us. And that dream for the church has continued and is being lived out today in the work to affirm the full inclusion of LGBTQ+ people in all sacraments and all levels of leadership. That dream of full inclusion was set in motion when the Philadelphia 11 risked civil disobedience, and the possibility of losing so much, in order to force church leadership to do what was right.

In light of their dreams and their struggles, what dreams do we have for our world so that it can be remade to look more like what God hopes for us and creation? What might we have to risk or even lose to make those dreams come true?

In the words of our Gospel Hymn this morning, "So daily dying to the way of self, so daily living in your way of love, we walk the road, Lord Jesus, that you trod."

Our Gospel challenge is to die to our selves so that we might walk in the way of love. But in doing that, we are always walking the road that Jesus has already trod. Amen.

Resources:

https://www.episcopalarchives.org/cgi-bin/ENS/ENSpress_release.pl?pr_number=74200

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/2005/09/05/priest-katrina-swanson-70-dies/8d24e7a7-7526-4e58-8773-6d99b069db96/>

<https://www.ncronline.org/news/people/philadelphia-11-reunion-recalls-ministry-pioneering-women-priests>