

Servant of God

February 28, 2010 – Ordination of Roy Laing to the Diaconate
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Texts – Acts 6:1-7; John 13:1-17

Back in 1957 the First Brethren Church of Sarasota, Florida had a groundbreaking service. Now if you've ever been to a groundbreaking ceremony you know that normally what happens is that someone takes a ceremonial shovel and turns over a chunk of dirt and that's it. It's a symbolic gesture. But these folks had a bit different idea. Recalling the words of Jesus to, **"Take my yoke upon you,"** this church decided to borrow an old one-horse plough and harness two of their strongest young men to it.

So when they were all gathered, they hooked the two men up, the signal was given and the men PULLED... but nothing happened. They strained at the harness, but they couldn't budge that plough even an inch.

So then the entire Building Committee of the congregation took hold of the rope, and they PULLED. But the plough wouldn't budge. Even they couldn't get it to move.

Other church officers were added, and the Sunday School officers and teachers, and they PULLED... but still they couldn't get the plough to budge.

Finally every member of the congregation who was present each took hold of the rope. And only then, with every member pulling together, the plough moved, and the ground was broken.¹

This morning we've gathered to set apart our dear friend, Roy Laing, for the ministry of a Deacon. And let me say that I think he's going to be a marvellous Deacon. I believe he already models what the diaconate is about. But we need to remember: Roy is only going to be as good as we allow him to be. His success in ministry will depend on our being willing to pull on the rope along with him.

You see ministry isn't something those ordained folk do, while the rest of us sit back and watch. No, ministry is something we do together as the body of Christ. In fact there really isn't much that Roy will be able to do as a Deacon that he can't already do as a lay person. He's already doing work in the community with the breakfast club at General Brock School and he certainly doesn't need to be ordained for that. Hospital visiting and pastoral visits to our shut-ins are something you can do as a lay person. Reading the gospel in the service or even setting the altar is something he could do as a layman. We don't usually have a lay person do that, but I can remember leading the service one time when I was sick and having a licensed Lay Reader do everything except the absolution, the sermon, the eucharistic prayer and the blessing, and if he'd had some warning I could have had him do the sermon too.

So why, you might ask, do we need to ordain someone as a deacon at all? What difference does it make? And what does it actually mean to be a deacon? Well, that's where our bible readings this morning point the way.

In our reading from Acts, chapter 6 we're given a glimpse of the Jerusalem church in the very

¹ <http://www.thorndalebaptist.com/quotes.htm>

early days. And I think it's really encouraging to see that right there at the beginning they realised that in order to live out the gospel, they needed to take care of the needy amongst them. Widows back in those days could really fall on hard times. Without a husband to provide for them their options were pretty limited. And so the church decided to start a food bank. There may have even been some communal meals. The important thing is they were feeding the widows among them and taking care of them. And it was a growing ministry.

Now as I say, these were early days, so guess who were in there with their sleeves rolled up and heading up this ministry? That's right, the apostles, but there was a problem. The need had grown so large that it was cutting into their time for the ministry of the word; for preaching and teaching and evangelism. And that's where their gifts lay. That's what they had been specifically appointed to do. The food ministry was important. It needed to be done, but not at the cost of proclaiming the gospel. And so they came up with a great solution. They gathered the leaders of the church and said to them, **"It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word"** (Acts 6:2b-4 NIV). It's a lot like the solution that Jethro proposed to Moses when he was wearing himself out trying to minister to everybody.

So they chose seven men, presented them to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them and set them to work. And what you have here is the choosing and ordination of the first deacons in the church.

Now you might think, *"Hmmm, that seems like kind of a joe-job ministry – waiting on tables."* But that's not the way the early church saw it. Notice the criteria the apostles set for those first candidates to the diaconate. **"Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom."** Now are those the kinds of things you look for if you just see this as a grunt job? I don't think so. In fact I'm not sure they looked on any work in the church in that way. But they obviously saw this work as a pretty important ministry.

And as the orders of ministry developed in those first few centuries, deacons continued to be held in high regard. They actually worked more closely with their bishops than with the priests. Bishop Ignatius referred to one of his deacons as his "co-slave" in the service of God in Christ. And in fact bishops in those days were more often chosen from the ranks of the deacons than the priests.²

So what was it about the ministry of a deacon that was so important? Well, Bishop Ignatius put it rather well, I think. Deacons are slaves or servants in the service of God in Christ. It's a servant ministry. And where we tend to see serving as a lowly and possibly even demeaning role, the early church understood that it's when we are serving that we are most like Jesus.

Look at our gospel this morning. Jesus is gathered with his disciples in the upper room for his last supper with them before the crucifixion. He knows he's about to be betrayed. He knows he's going to be crucified and then John says, **"Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love"** (John 13:1 NIV). And immediately after that, verse 4 says, **"he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist."**⁵ **After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him"** (John 13:4, 5

2 <http://www.dace.org/deacons/history-extended.shtml>

NIV).

This was a servant's job. And yet, here was Jesus, their Lord and master, getting down on his hands and knees and washing their smelly dusty feet. When he got to Peter, Peter wasn't going to let him do it. You see Peter thought this was far too lowly a task for Jesus. But do you remember what Jesus said in Mark 10:43? **"Whoever wants to become greatest among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many"** (Mark 10:43, 44 NIV).

You see Jesus didn't wash his disciples' feet just to get them to be nice to each other. He was giving them a glimpse of what his life and mission were all about. He was giving them a glimpse of what the Cross was all about. He wanted to show them, John says, **"the full extent of his love"**. And in doing that he wanted them to understand that this was the kind of life and ministry he was calling them to. As his disciples, as his ambassadors in the world they weren't signing on for prestige and riches. Not at all. If the world was going to understand his love they needed to see it modelled in his followers. Jesus elevated serving others as the highest pursuit to which we can dedicate our lives. And that is the pre-eminent role of the Deacon, to model the servanthood of Christ.

They are to live out for us in a very intentional way what we are all called to be and do for each other and for the world.

Some of you may know that we have two expressions of the diaconate in the church. There are those who are called to serve as deacons permanently; what we sometimes call the Vocational Diaconate or Permanent Diaconate. And then there are those who serve as deacons for about a year before being ordained priests. Their calling is to priesthood, but first they serve as deacons. We call this the transitional diaconate. For a number of years the vocational diaconate was lost in our church. All we had were transitional deacons. Some people thought that was a belittling of the role of the deacon. And certainly it was important to recover the distinctive role of the diaconate, but I think there was something else going on there.

I think the church has always understood (and even when we lost sight of the role of the Vocational Deacon, we never quite lost sight of the fact) that the diaconate is the foundational expression of ordained ministry. You could say it is the most important. It is so important that we require every other ordained minister to first understand what it means to be a deacon – what it means to serve. In order to be a priest I first have to know what it means to be a servant. In order to be a bishop, I first have to know what it means to be a servant. And no matter what other ministry you take on, whether you become a bishop or an archbishop, you never stop being a deacon, it is in that servanthood that we demonstrate the life of Christ. It is in that servanthood that we demonstrate the love of Christ.

That's the ministry Roy has been called to today. And I can't think of anyone better suited to live that out before us than him. Anyone who knows Roy knows that he has a servant heart. Many of you will know that Roy has been one of our key volunteers and organisers for the breakfast program at General Brock School, but what you may not know is what Roy does every day that he's there. He washes the dishes. You'll often see him doing the same thing here at coffee hour or when we're having a dinner. He does the job no one else wants to do. And he does it with grace and joy. Roy delights in serving people. But he also shines with the love of Jesus. It's hard not to be cheered up when Roy comes into the room. And if you've taken the time to talk to him you'll know that Roy loves our Lord Jesus passionately. He's a natural evangelist.

Just like Phillip and Stephen of old.

Yes, we've made a good choice in ordaining Roy to the diaconate today, but remember his role is meant to model for us what we are all called to: to demonstrate the love of Jesus through servant hearts and lives. And his ministry will only be truly effective if we take up the plough-harness with him and pull together.

May it be so. May it be done. Amen.