



# TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

*on the Branford Green*

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Priesthood of all Believers

June 26, 2016

The Rev. Sharon K. Gracen

Unbeknownst to me, our wardens and several ministry chairs decided to do me the honor of celebrating the 15th anniversary of my ordination to the priesthood, which occurred on June 23rd 2001, with some special additions to today's liturgy. I am touched and thank you for your thoughtfulness. As often happens, the Holy Spirit seems to be in on the plans as well, with today's readings. Elijah and Jesus both present hard challenges for those who are called or who think about being called to a committed ministry. Elijah announced his calling of Elisha by throwing his mantle over him. Elisha recognized what was expected of him. He slaughtered his twelve oxen, the source of his livelihood, gave the meat to the people, and apparently left his life behind him. We do not know if he did return home to kiss his parents goodbye. Jesus suggested a similarly difficult path to ministry. Walk away from your grieving family, leave everything behind and follow me. In another gospel, he tells a rich young man to sell all that he owns and give the proceed to the poor and only then will he be ready to truly follow Jesus. My call to ministry came in the aftermath of a whirlwind, an Indiana tornado and later called me to great life changes.

I didn't go looking for it. In fact, when it first came, I strategized how to get out of it. I strongly proposed a different way to serve God, sort of "let me stay as I am, I'll just do it better." In July of 1741, colonial pastor Jonathan Edwards preached his famous sermon "Sinners in the hands of an angry God." My version was more "Suburban housewife in the hands of an insistent God." Eventually, I accepted that being called to ordained ministry was like being a little bit pregnant. The outcome is pretty much beyond your control. Parenthood and ministry are not dissimilar. For me, they have been twin callings, unconditional love, and an awareness of the nature of the work, not to be a best friend, but a mother or a spiritual leader. Therefore it is not a calling that automatically leads to popularity.

Early on, before I was officially on the ordination path, I was appointed by the Bishop of Indianapolis to lead the social justice commission for the diocese. The work took me beyond Indianapolis and into contact with the most exciting ideas I had ever encountered. At a conference on Economic Justice I learned about how Christians around the country were challenging institutionalized poverty and inequality. The more stories I heard about the work going on, the more I wanted. At the closing Eucharist I sat in a pew with tears running down my face, grateful for having been introduced for such work. I remember talking to God in my head, asking what I was supposed to do with all of this new knowledge and passion and feeling quite amazed that God might think I was right for such holy work.

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I don't actually remember making the decision to stop running from God and say yes to ordination. I remember having a conversation with the rector of St. Alban's Church at which plans were being made. It was the beginning of a long line of very fortunate things. Doors opened, all necessary approvals were given, scholarships that I didn't even request appeared, and willing mentors stepped forward. Of course, there were hard parts too. A 25 year marriage came to an end, not because of being on the ordination path, but that exposed many things that I was working hard to ignore. Lots of things that defined who I was became like Elisha's oxen. I had to let go of them and trust that I would be all right without them. That trust thing is a big part of such a path. The preparation for ordination varies from place to place in the church. I was lucky to have a very supportive process, but that doesn't necessarily mean that it was fun. Paul's letter to the Galatians has these two lists - one is the things on which we are turn our backs and the others are the things that we are to embrace and work at. While sorcery, licentiousness, drunkenness and carousing may be things that we easily let go of after our college years, the rest of the list is a perpetual struggle; enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions and envy. These lists are meant for all Christians, but there are expectation on those of us in the clergy that we will be committed to vigilance and resistance. And not merely vigilant, but active in understanding where these darker things dwell in us and doing the work of overcoming them. The struggles don't end with ordination.

The other list, the good stuff, isn't any easier to achieve. For all of us, it takes perpetual reminding to use that list as we go about our lives. I have a bracelet with that verse from Galatians on it - sometimes I feel as though I should have it tattooed on my arm so I would never be without it. "Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." Those are the attributes of a fully realized Christian life. You have the right to expect that I will embody them more often than not. Fortunately, I have the right to expect you to forgive me when I am less than perfect in my exercise of these virtues. I personally think that the good list should be a part of the priestly ordination vows, instead those virtues are merely alluded to in a broad question, "Will you do your best to pattern your life in accordance with the teaching of Christ, so that you may be a wholesome example to your people?"

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And speaking of ordination. Episcopal priests are all ordained twice; once as a deacon and once as a priest. The diaconate is an order of service, taking the gospel into the world. Both of my ordinations fell on the feast of the Nativity of John the Baptist, June 23rd, a year apart - which may explain some things. The exciting work of economic justice and anti-racism, and peace work is what is called prophetic ministry - the ministry of the prophets, of which John the Baptist was a particularly committed participant. The true work of a prophet is to console the oppressed and to speak truth to power and apathy, which usually costs them their heads. So, not interested in decapitation, it seems to me that the work of prophets today is to speak truth to power and apathy in such a way that people can hear it and be challenged by it rather than enraged and murderous. So for me, ordained ministry is actually one of juggling the prophetic call and caution, not for my own self, but with the kingdom as a goal, seeking ways to inspire the people I am called to serve to help save the world.

Every bishop with whom I have served has told me that I will always be too far out in front of my congregation on justice issues and that I will have to work to reign myself in so that you will be able to hear and be challenged and not be offended and turned off. Their counsel has proved to be a touchstone for me. Every time I write a sermon on peace, non-violence, refugees, inequality I feel as though I am on a tightrope, trying to find the balance between the reality of such harsh things in our world and trying to find the way to tell the stories that will gently inspire you to righteous anger on behalf of the powerless and the suffering and hopefully to find a desire to do something about it. I truly believe that that is my job.

However, as I have been given this moment to reflect on my ordination, I must remind you that you too, by virtue of your baptisms, are ministers of the Gospel. You are a part of the priesthood of all believers. The work of being the Body of Christ in the world is one that we have chosen to do together. I am prepared to give it all I've got, in gratitude to the first women who fought to be ordained. Their courage and sacrifice, and trust me, it was dangerous sacrifice, made my way smooth and easy. I live my ordination in gratitude to Peter, who is such a loving partner in ministry, a committed truth-teller when I need to hear it and a strong shoulder when I need one. And today, I remember my ordination grateful to who thought it was a good idea to call me as the 47th rector of Trinity Church, and who have been true brothers and sisters in Christ for the work we have been given to do. Thank you, and amen.

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