

Sunday June 9, 2024

Good Morning on this beautiful early summer day in June! A season of new beginnings which are so welcome after our long and uncertain spring here in the high desert. And a season of anniversaries. This week my husband and I will be celebrating our 41st wedding anniversary. And in two weeks, it will be 45th years since I was ordained in Christ's one, holy catholic and apostolic church.

Not all anniversaries are celebrated. This past week, we remembered the 80th anniversary of D-Day, a time of gratitude and sorrow. And next month we mark the 50th anniversary of the first ordinations of women in the Episcopal Church, July 29, 1974, the Feast of Mary and Martha of Bethany.

If you think of this date as a time of great joy and celebration, well, let me tell you, you weren't there! On July 29, 1974, at the Episcopal Church of the Advocate in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, three retired bishops ordained eleven women to the priesthood. Although the Bishop of Hong Kong had ordained Florence Li Tim-oi to the priesthood in 1944, the wider Anglican communion opposed women's ordination.

Let me take you back a few years. In the Episcopal Church, women could not be deputies to General Convention, nor even serve on vestries until 1970! Although we were always told that "for us men and for our salvation" really meant everyone, it didn't apply to women when it came to ordination. What an amazing coincidence at General Convention in 1970, when women could be deputies, that it was decided that "men" actually could mean women when it came to being deacons. It was considered a foregone conclusion that the 1973 convention would allow women to become priests, but the opposition came loaded for bear! The resolution failed.

And so the next year, these eleven women, already ordained deacons, presented themselves for ordination to the priesthood before three retired bishops at the historically black Church of the Advocate in Philadelphia. And let the fireworks begin!

At the ordination ceremony, one male priest called the proceedings "schismatic" and another said it "offer[ed] up the sound and sight and smell of perversion."

And the official pushback, was swift and strong. Within weeks, the Episcopal House of Bishops convened an emergency meeting. There, they overwhelmingly voted to invalidate the 11 ordinations. The presiding bishop also warned the women they could be disciplined if they attempted to carry out priestly duties. The Bishops involved in the ordinations in Philadelphia were censured.

In 1974, I was a senior at Cornell University. One day, I saw a Ms magazine and my eyes were drawn to the cover. It was a photo of Carter Hayward in priestly garments, with her hand raised in blessing. Bingo! Light bulb! All the threads of my life and times and prayers came together and I heard anew the call of God that I'd had since childhood with a focus - the priesthood! It was the miracle of the incarnation. I presented myself to my college chaplain, the Bishop, several committees, a psychiatrist, and the Episcopal Divinity School which I entered in September 1976. And in September 1976, General Convention voted to ordain women to the priesthood and the episcopate. And the Philadelphia 11 and four other women were recognized and "regularized" as priests.

No, it wasn't easy. But by some crazy dumb luck, I was in a diocese that already had accepted women as candidates for the priesthood. And my university church community was supportive. But not all were. Carter Hayward tells a story of serving communion at the altar rail shortly after her ordination where she was bitten on the hand by a male priest! I remember one family dinner where the my bombastic (and usually inebriated) uncle began to angrily rail against women's ordination. It was memorable because my very proper Episcopal grandmother said, "Shut up, Sam. Just shut up!"

Better theologians than I can parse out the arguments for women's ordination. The Lambeth Conference had in 1968 found no theological argument against ordaining women. In its first meeting, the Anglican Consultative Council, a representative body from each church in the Communion, had also come to the same conclusion, in response to a request from Hong Kong. But it took the Church of England another 20 years to ordain its first women in 1994, and although the Episcopal Church ordained its first woman bishop, Barbara Harris, in 1989, the Church of England took another 20 years to ordain its first woman bishop.

As Anglicans, we have always looked to what Richard Hooker called the "three-legged stool" - Scripture, reason and tradition, as the authority on which we base

our faith. Each leg of the stool contributes equally to our balanced approach. Each of the three sources of authority must be perceived and interpreted in light of the other two.

Scripture records many women who held leadership roles, including prophets, in ancient Israel and the churches of New Testament times. Jesus treated women as valued disciples. "The twelve were with him, as well as Mary, called Magdalene, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others." These women, along with Mary Magdalene who has been called the Apostle to the Apostles, bore the first witness to his Resurrection to the rest of the disciples. Paul writes of the ministries of many women, which he equates with his own apostolic work. "Chloe" in I Cor. 1 is the leader of her church. And "Junia, the Apostle" of Romans 16, not to mention "Phoebe, the Deacon" in the same chapter. Does Paul contradict himself when he writes to the Christians in Corinth that their women should keep silence in church?

With respect to tradition, when we look back to the post-apostolic age, we see that a lack of a central religious authority in early Christianity enabled women to enjoy positions of authority in numerous locales throughout the Mediterranean area. It is not clear whether women functioned as priests in the early churches although there are strong suggestions that they did. A fourth-century bishop spoke out strongly against women who were priests, indicating there were such. There are fragments of information from archaeological discoveries that suggest a wide role for women in these early years. Some Greek-language tombstones that refer to women as presbyters have been located, and a mosaic of Theodora is inscribed with "Episcopa" over her haloed head. Of course, some say, she was the wife of a bishop.

Now we come to reason. Most arguments against women's ordination in historical and contemporary Christianity have based themselves on the intrinsic inferiority of women to men. Women are said to be physically weaker, less intelligent, and more sinful. Perhaps we can forgive those writing in the fourth century, but today?

In 1977 many church conservatives, opposing various Episcopal reforms, including the new Prayer Book and the ordination of women, gathered. Out of came the Anglican Church of North America. The 1978 ACNA broke up over the next few years into an alphabet soup of various dioceses and affiliations. In 2004, the consecration of Bishop Gene Robinson, a gay man, solidified the new Anglican Church in North America that exists today.

ACNA and its affiliates have a real problem. They inherited women priests from the Episcopal Church, but they are hugely conflicted about them. Their compromise has been to allow ordained women to function, but only under the “headship” of at least two men in authority over them. I am not making this up! Here is a quote from an ACNA leader. “The example of the inception of sin in the Garden of Eden should be sufficient to convince us. Eve was deceived by the serpent's subtle suggestion. Adam followed Eve's lead instead of stopping her-- and this was his original sin. Adam was created to be the leader and Eve the helper (Adam having been created first.) So the entire issue goes to wisdom. Having women bishops or rectors is a totally foolish idea... and is asking for trouble.” He continued by saying that a woman’s rightful role is submission and bearing children. Handmaid’s Tale, anyone? ACNA also believes that women priests lead to an acceptance of LGBTQ persons, undermines women's ministries, and that the feminization of the clergy discourages men's participation in the church. By the way, these tenets are what the Bend Ministerial Association requires what members believe and sign on to. Many do not allow women to teach boys once they become adolescents. And the Southern Baptist Convention is now calling on its members to expel churches that allow women to be children’s ministers.

The ordination of women is not about civil rights or gender discrimination. It is about call, vocation, baptismal ministry and the Holy Spirit. As a priest once said, if you baptize them, you have to ordain them. Both men and women are the embodiment of redeemed humanity, the priesthood of all believers. And let’s remember and affirm that it is Jesus Christ himself who presides at the table of the holy mysteries. Not all are called to this ministry in the name of Christ certainly, but vocations are tested and affirmed not on the basis of genitalia. In Christ there is no male or female. As a little girl, I couldn’t be an acolyte although I longed to be. Guess I showed them! The ordination of women is an ongoing call

to the Church to discern the Holy Spirit moving in our time and in individuals and to celebrate the gifts that each of us brings.