

Peggy Newman's Ordination
June 14, 2008 (John A. Baldwin)
To the Glory of God. Amen.

"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you". These words from the prophet Jeremiah, which Bill Starkey read just a few moments ago, send shivers down my back. Jeremiah's insight is not just a one time event affecting only him, 3000 years ago, but an ongoing reality touching every person here this morning.... God has known each one of us intimately even before we were formed. He has blessed & consecrated us (set us apart) long before we were even dimly aware of it. Isn't that awesome?

What we are doing then this morning, as Peggy Newman is ordained a deacon in the Episcopal Church is sacramental, an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.... something that happened years ago as God formed her in the womb, but which has taken Peggy a while to recognize, and for us to acknowledge and confirm. God gifted her with the heart of a deacon long ago, and her experiences and training have enabled that gift to grow and flourish over time. It is with great joy that we join today in thanking God for the gifts and talents that he has bestowed upon this lovely lady. But this service is not just about Peggy. It's about every one of us here; for we too are called to serve God in the world.

All sacramental actions in the church are not just about an individual. The Eucharist is not simply for the benefit of the one receiving the bread and wine, but also for the strengthening of a whole community gathered in faith. A baptism is not just for the benefit of a child & parents, but also for everyone who joins in renewing their baptismal covenant. A marriage is not just for the benefit of the couple being joined in Holy Matrimony, but also reminds married couples of the vows they have exchanged, serves as encouragement for those contemplating marriage, and models the importance of covenants in people's lives. So too with ordination. Although we are gathered to honor Peggy at this moment of grace in her life, it's not just about her. We are also here to be reminded of the vital importance of our own ministry, be it lay or ordained.

Earlier this week I went to Children's Hospital in Norfolk to see Tyler, an infant who was born 10 weeks prematurely, weighing only two and a half pounds. After entering the neonatal unit and scrubbing my hands for 3 minutes, I was permitted to put my hand inside the incubator, lay my hand upon his head, and offer a blessing, welcoming him to the world. As I touched this tiny, precious, vulnerable human being, I wondered how many other times hands might touch this child in love and blessing as we will shortly be doing for Peggy.

I'd like to think that every night of my life God has lovingly laid his hand upon me as I've slept, gifting me with dreams. I remember with gratitude my mother's gentle touch when I was sick; my father's outstretched hand when we crossed a stream in the White Mountains of New Hampshire; the multitude of hugs I've received at the Peace & hands shaken across the years. I've been the recipient of gentle, healing hands in surgery, as well as a bishop's prayerful hands in confirmation & (almost 30 years ago to the day) of ordination as a deacon myself.

The gift of touch, physically, spiritually, metaphorically when done with gentleness & love is perhaps the greatest gift of ministry.....reaching out to others across the divide of

space to visibly remind them that they are not alone.....connecting them to God who is at the heart of the world. This is what true Evangelism is all about too.....helping to bridge the gap between the human and the divine and connecting the two.

A stereotypical view of Evangelism, that feels to many Episcopalians like fingernails scratching across a chalkboard, is that of someone who is convinced they have the whole truth and nothing but, invading the space of another who doesn't have their truth, and overpowering their resistance until they also truly believe in the same way that the evangelist believes. This stereotypical view is disrespectful, abusive and intrusive. How truly unlike our Lord, who listened with a heart of love to the wounds and hurts of others, and then compassionately invited them to come along on a journey with him towards the Kingdom of God.

In a recent book on Evangelism, David Gortner writes: "True evangelism emerges from a practiced disposition of gratitude, a willfully embraced motivation arising from our experience of wonder, delight and gratification in the Holy Spirit that propels us out to others to share our good news. It is a way of seeing and hearing others as people who also have stories of delight and gratitude for God's movement in their lives. Evangelism is a ... joyful spiritual discipline of seeing and naming the Holy Spirit at work in ourselves and those we encounter - giving voice to our own grace-filled experiences, and helping others find their voice." "An evangelism rooted in a theology of love, if really embraced, cannot help being evocative."

So now Peggy, we come now to that moment in time when the ordinand is traditionally asked to stand for a brief pep talk before the moment (soon to come) when your Bishop and the clergy assembled here today will stand around you and lay hands upon you as you are ordained a deacon. Please understand that what we are about to do is not, as a smart aleck once asserted, "To remove your backbone", but rather to surround you with love and support.

You are about to be ordained into the sacred order of Deacons, an order of ministry that is no better or worse than that of the laity, priests or bishops. It does have a focus and emphasis that is different from the others, yet which the others ignore to their impoverishment. As a deacon you are called to a compassionate servant ministry in the world, and to lovingly set the table so that God's beloved may dine at the Eucharistic banquet. Following in the footsteps of Stephen, one of the original 7 deacons who effectively evangelized St. Paul, you are also called to the ministry of evangelism.... to touch others with love and compassion and draw them closer to God, to Jesus, and to the Holy Spirit.

Your ministry has already been a powerful one, as a member of this congregation here at Emmanuel, at All Saint's, Virginia Beach, at the Mission of the Holy Spirit, as well as to your family, friends and clients. All those who have been involved in your formation for ministry have the utmost trust that you will faithfully serve the Lord with love and grace in the years to come. You have been blessed with many gifts that you are employing to further the reign of God. May the Lord bless you with his support and guidance, and may you never forget that you are called to serve every one whom the Holy Spirit sends your way with love, compassion and humility. Amen