

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dn. Keith McKenna at St. Augustine's Church, January 20, 21, 2007
John 14: 1-14

I am told you have never had a deacon at St. A's, so I thought it would be good for me to preach a sermon about deacons.

Let me start by making sure that we understand that this conversation is about Permanent deacons. People who have graduated from Seminary and are headed for the priesthood are first ordained as Transitional deacons. They generally move on to ordination to the priesthood about six months later. Permanent deacons, on the other hand, are educated separately, and ordained by a bishop to a different, separate, and equal, order in the life of the church.

Today's gospel reading, from John 14, is an appropriate one for this sermon about permanent deacons, because in it we hear Jesus talking to the disciples about how they are to conduct themselves, in the world, after he has gone to be with the Father. How we are to conduct ourselves, in the world: That is uniquely the concern, and work, of deacons, under the guidance and Grace of the Holy Spirit.

Hold that thought!

Let's begin this by looking back to some other great documents of the church, composed in the middle of the first century, starting with the first letter to Timothy, and then moving on to the Letter of James. The author of 1st Timothy writes of his concerns that there should be a good strong administrative structure for the new church. In the third chapter he starts by talking about what should be expected of a bishop.

1st Tim. 3, verses 1-7.

Timothy goes on to talk about deacons:

1st Tim. 3: 8-13.

Focus please on the last line: "Those who serve well as deacons gain a good

standing for themselves and great boldness in the faith that is in Christ Jesus."

We deacons interpret that to mean that we are to prove ourselves, boldly, by our work and leadership in the world, in fact by our striving to imitate Christ in our lives in the world. First the Holy Spirit, and now Christ in our lives.

Hold that thought!

Back around the same time the letters to Timothy were written, another writer, who called himself James, composed a sermon for the faithful to read and consider. He covered a number of topics, all of which have to do with building and maintaining the church into the future. One of those topics is of particular interest to deacons. It is the topic of good works.

Good works?

Well- before we get into that we need first to reaffirm that the core teaching of Christianity is that salvation is by faith alone, not by good works.

In fact it is said that Martin Luther wished the early fathers had not include the Letter of James in the Canon of the Testament. Luther was so totally focused on Faith, as the sole means by which we achieve salvation, that he worried that James might be taken as teaching other wise.

But James doesn't argue against salvation through faith.

Instead, he argues that for that salvific faith to be maintained, it must be supported; it must be kept strong! James calls for the faithful to keep the church alive, and vital to the world, and active always in encouraging and supporting people in faith. To build that church, and keep it going and growing, he says, we need something concrete. We need Godly activity to keep faith alive.

Paul also worried about this problem of faith without activity. In his letters to the Corinthians he says he has been hearing about people who declare themselves to be Christians but who seem to feel no responsibility to live

lives that demonstrate faith. They seem to be getting fat and lazy in a false self-assurance that they are safe no matter what they do or don't do, as long as they say they have faith. He cautions them against believing that faith will remain strong in them even if they do nothing to affirm it in their lives in the world.

James, in his epistle, tells us he has no patience with that kind of behavior!

He tells us in pretty salty language that he sees a lively church as the only way to keep the people firmly rooted in the faith. He wants people to act in the world as Jesus acted, bringing food, and healing, and comforting words, to people who are suffering from real hunger, from real illness, from real despair. He wants people to act in imitation of the way Christ lived his life, in servant ministry, in the world!

James says: "I, by my works, will show you my faith."

And that is exactly what deacons do. They take action in the world, and they set, by their example, the path others need to take if they hope to maintain a joyful faith, and, in that way, to dignify the example set by Christ.

So- now it's time to get on to the Gospel passage chosen for today.

When Thomas asks, in John 14: 5, "How can we know the way?" Jesus answers: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

For the writer of 1st Timothy, and for James, and for all deacons, then and now, the only way that this teaching of Jesus could stay alive in the world, through all the years, would be in a strong church, grounded for sure in faith, but also dedicated to carrying out the imperatives laid down by Jesus: to continue his work in the world, to feed the hungry, heal the sick, clothe the naked.

Around the Diocese of New York, and in the nation, you will find deacons running shelters, hospices, feeding ministries. What is more important than that however is that you will find deacons teaching and helping people of

faith to do the same.

For 4 months after 9/11, I was one of a number of deacons who served as chaplains at Ground Zero, first on the pile and then in the pit, offering a ministry of presence, prayer, and reassurance to the people working there. Feel free to ask me about that if you wish, but note this:

For every deacon down there in the smoke, there were ten others leading groups of people from parishes all over the diocese, to St. Paul's chapel, to spend 12 hour days and nights making coffee and serving food and handing out clothing.

Much has been said about the deacon as the icon of the servant ministry. If that means something it means that deacons stand there as reminders to the faithful of their need to imitate Christ in his work in the world. Deacons do this, within the Grace of the Holy Spirit, by their presence and example, by their words of prophetic ministry in sermons, and by their vested participation in the liturgy.

That is why, if there is a deacon present, it is the deacon who gives the dismissal at the end of the service, near the door. In that gesture the deacon shows the way for the faithful, back out into the world, where much, God Knows, remains to be done.