**The Diaconal Hermeneutic**

**Session Four**

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And perhaps you are thinking, “well, it’s about time.”

Preface:

Up to this point we have engaged the concept of a hermeneutic. It is a framework, or lens, based on a particular stance or foundation with and through which we interpret what we are reading, observing, or seeing—hence the subtitle of the course. We have considered what makes church church and explored the common characteristics of ordained leadership and then parsed out what is different and distinctive among the three historic Orders. From that I propose that the distinct nature of each Order frames a hermeneutic with and through which inhabitants of each order see themselves and, for the deacon most importantly, see the “world” (global and local context). From that, each Order lives out its ministry.

All the work up to this point is to make the case that there is a theologically grounded and ecclesially appropriate reason for deacons to use a conscious hermeneutic. That is, deacons intentionally engage a way of interpreting as deacons in advocacy within the church and in interpreting TO the church, “the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world.”

In much the same way that ordained diaconal leadership is not just a list of tasks and functions, it is important to lay down groundwork for the diaconal hermeneutic so that it is not seen, heard, and dismissed as just the deacon’s personal crankiness or “political” stance or affiliation.

I have developed some summary points over time that help me organize my thoughts and words that seek to articulate the foundation and qualities of the diaconal hermeneutic. It is not exhaustive. It is always open to amendment and improvement. I think it gets us well down the road.

For our thought and discussion, here is the list.

**The Diaconal Hermeneutic is—**

**• Gospel based.**Well yeah. Isn’t everything? Our faith grows directly out of the narrative and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus, the Christ, in the four texts called Gospels, as well as the Good News that is/can be found there. So, the hermeneutic of bishop and priest as well as the deacon, is based on that very Good News. Why it is important to name this for the deacon as more than a BFO [blinding flash of the obvious] is that a primary objection to the deacon’s voice in the church is that s/he is professing “politics,” a secular agenda, personal opinion, someone’s party line but not Jesus’. The deacon finds in scripture that which others downplay or simply don’t want to address because it calls for “kingdom building” action in the world that is at minimum discomfiting and, if fully embraced, radical. [Both meanings: things taken to their true “root”—radix and sharply alternative to the current wisdom and practice.] The immediate defensive reaction is to say it is NOT gospel. For the deacon herself, checking perceptions and reactions against the Gospel is an important corrective to doing what others would accuse one of, i.e. being more currently political/partisan than radically Christian. A reason for this first summary point crystallized in a session I was doing in Los Angeles in a year that will be apparent. I said something to the effect that this grounding—as well as other elements of the hermeneutic below—was critical so as not to be heard simply as a voice of the Kerry campaign for president. The woman, soon-to-be Archdeacon (now retired) exhaled a huge sigh of relief that was almost startling. She was paralyzed by this exact worry and found an exploration of the gospel base of her diaconal voice in community very freeing.

It’s all there. The Good News is, as retired New Testament scholar William Countryman says simply, both Good AND News. Being able to articulate its familiarity as newness is its power. Its capacity to catch attention, disturb, and perhaps motivate is its energy. All central to the deacon’s work.

All this is symbolized in our shared liturgy as the Deacon is given the essential role, in the rite, of proclaiming—not just reading—the Gospel at the heart of our hearing the Word.

**The Diaconal Hermeneutic is—**

**• prophet informed.**

We have already noted the archetypal presence of the prophet in the life and story of the people of Israel. Prophet, priest, and king comprise the fullness of oversight, guidance, and leadership for people covenanted to an exclusive relationship with the One Holy Living God. The best way Jesus’ contemporaries could identify who he was from what he did, said, and taught was to see him as a prophet. He did not disclaim this. The “prophetic voice” was an energetic presence in the post-resurrection/pre-Constantinian church. Paul lists prophecy as a gift of the Spirit in several of the letters to the young churches. I love the usually overlooked verse where Paul is welcomed into the home of a ‘first’ “deacon” Philip, whose household in Caesarea also included his “four unmarried daughters each of whom had the gift of prophecy.” [Acts 21:8] It is the last we hear about the original “seven” and it is the prophetic voice that carries their inaugural *diakonia* into the next generation(s).

When Constantine embraces Christianity, it becomes “official,” aligned with power and empire (albeit a motheaten empire on its way to collapse). Very quickly the prophetic voice and presence is challenged, changed, and for long periods of time, muted. Indeed, the quite recent language of the deacon’s “prophetic voice” is part of recovering, even now, that which has been muted and misdirected for a very, very long time.

“Prophet informed” invites us to look more closely at the long prophetic tradition in Judaism and Christianity and for deacons in particular to learn from them. This could be a course in and of itself. We will look at this some more in a future session. It is an essential dimension of diaconal identity, perception, and interpretation. Suffice it to say, when I speak of prophets and prophecy I do not mean fortune telling, future prediction, or divining. I do harken to our weekly creedal affirmation that the Holy Spirit “spoke through the prophets,” and is speaking even today.

**The Diaconal Hermeneutic is—**

**• baptismally realized.**

One of the primary misunderstandings of the diaconate still alive and well among us is that the deacon is supposed to go out into the world and do service, minister to the poor, the sick and the lonely, speak up in and to the community all by themself on behalf of the congregation. More crudely put, if we at St. Swithin’s have a deacon, she will be out there doing good stuff and we have that whole base of “outreach” and “church in the world” covered. It’s nice if she checks in now and then, liturgically, but not to bother us with that stuff—unless she can share a couple of really heart-warming stories.

The Good News calls us all—all God’s people—to bring that news alive in and for all the world. This is not new news. It goes back at least to the first Abrahamic covenant by which “all nations” will be brought into loving relationship with the Holy One. Living the Good News is, or should be, at the heart of our worship, teaching, and program. In fact, once the church was established and thrived there has been a strong pull and temptation to focus it all on who we are and what we do IN and FOR the church, and there alone. To be sure, at ordination, the deacons is charged to make Christ’s love known among those with whom she “lives, and works, and worships.” But all the gathered faithful have promised to “proclaim, by word and example the Good News of God in Christ, to seek and service Christ in all persons, loving neighbor as self,” and to “strive for justice and peace, respecting the dignity of every human being.”

The deacon proclaims the Good News in the heart of the liturgy. The deacon interprets the Good News in preaching, teaching, organizing, and shaping the peoples’ prayers. The Good News is realized in the world by all those who have been washed and filled with the Spirit. As St. Francis is said to have said to someone, “you are the only Gospel many people will ever encounter.”

The Baptismal Covenant, one of the greatest gifts of the 1979 Prayer Book, is always in the diaconal consciousness. It is a primary element of the diaconal hermeneutic. I once said to a bishop that it was interesting to me that every one of the students from his diocese at the school, in their preaching both in the homiletics class and to the whole school community, always mentioned the Baptismal Covenant. “They darn well better!” he said, jokingly, but not joking. In his discernment and formation of deacons it was clear to all that *diakonia* was/is baptismally realized.

**The Diaconal Hermeneutic is—**

**• systemic and critical.**

There is a parable-like story told of a deacon that appears in Ormonde Plater’s book, *Many Servants* that is repeated in many other places, probably to the point of cliché, but nonetheless deeply true.

One day a deacon was walking in the park by the river and heard the cries of someone on the edge of drowning. She leaps in and pulls the person to the shore and sees that they can breathe and function on their own and then continues the walk, only to hear and see another person floating by in panicked flounder. She jumps in and rescues that person. The walk continues, and there it is again. A third victim appears, splashing away. This time the deacon turns abruptly and starts to backtrack. A person nearby asks, “aren’t you going to jump in and rescue him?” “No,’ she replied, “you are, while I go upstream to find out and stop whoever is throwing people in the river.”

I do a graphic with the students that has a stick-figure deacon “at the door” [great art is not my gift] facing another stick figure who can be labeled as “poor, sick, weak, lonely, marginalized, etc.” All the “problems” and ills of the world can, and most frequently do show up embodied in a person, often literally on the church doorstep. There is a clear gospel imperative to respond in and to the immediate situation. To the degree there is any “outreach” in a congregation it is likely to be charitable response to persons like these in need. These folk are, however valued as individuals loved of God, etc., symptoms. They are the symptomatic expression of much larger “problems”—the guy upstream throwing people in the drink.

Behind each presenting person—as symptom—there are systems, structures, institutions, practices, interests. The renowned biblical scholar Walter Wink [cf. his slim volume, *The Powers that Be*] gives these entities biblical names—“principalities and powers.” They are real and have been known for millennia. And they are daunting, intimidating, and overwhelming. Their dauntingness easily becomes a reason, if not an excuse, for not only not doing anything about them but even for not naming or acknowledging them. A few years ago I was really startled in the school office when one of the newer faculty, a relatively recent graduate of the school, strode in and announced, “I’m tired of feeding the hungry!” “Oh dear,” I thought to myself, “another vocation lost; burnout already taking its toll; what on earth is he going to lay on the students today?” But he then said, “I want to find out WHY they are hungry and do something about THAT.”

He had shifted from seeing, thinking, interpreting symptomatically to seeking, thinking, and critically assessing systematically. Deacons develop eyes and skills to see, or seek out, the systems that stand behind particulars. Often the systems are hidden and intentionally obscured because those benefiting from them know at some level that they are wrong, or at least flawed. We could also use the language of sinfulness, but that has been sufficiently warped in contemporary consciousness that we would not be heard, or gleefully dismissed in most circles. In addition to acts of individual generosity and charity, God’s people are called to challenge the principalities and powers that hurt, oppress, steal from, marginalize all those in whom we seek to find and serve the Christ.  
There is a long history in the Christian West of individualizing life and ministry so that systemic understandings are labeled as “worldly,” “political,” “not our concern as Christians.” One particularly pernicious way of thinking is to take a leaf from ancient Israel (one that Jesus encountered and challenged) that poverty, illness, slavery were punishments for and signs of individual sin. For example, the great story of the man born blind in John’s Gospel of whom the disciples ask, “who sinned, him or his parents?” It had to be some ONE’s individual fault. The modern take, which is squeamish about ‘sin” simply blames the victim. If you are poor, it is your own, personal, individual fault. You didn’t work hard enough or, the great catch-all, you made “bad choices.” We even do this with illness—taking us right back to the story in John. A person is diagnosed with cancer. First question, “did she smoke?” i.e. did she become ill through her own “bad choices.”

In a society deeply addicted to individualism, the deacon faces some hard sledding with a systemically informed hermeneutic. But it is there, in scripture, in history, in tradition.

This is all caught in my favorite quote from the saintly Dom Helder Cammara, RC Archbishop of Recife, Brazil (in the deeply poor Northeast). “When I fed the hungry, they called me a saint. When I asked, ‘why are they hungry,’ the called me a communist.”

After this outpouring on systemic, I simply add that by “critical” I mean the use of critical, analytical skills in parsing how the world works. The term “critical” itself has recently become demonized in popular political rhetoric. Just be aware of that.

I sum much of this up by telling deacons-in-formation that they are called by the being of their order to be, or become, “worldly wise.” This, by the way, means that for deacons acutely, ‘lifelong learning” is essential, not optional. How systems and institutions are created, sustained, disguised, “spun,” rationalized call on the deacon to delve into “secular” resources and ways of thinking. THEN comes the task of interpreting insights gained from such study and experience, TO the church through a Gospel lens. The learning and translating never ends.

**The Diaconal Hermeneutic is—**

**• relational.**

This dimension of a hermeneutic is already addressed in my tirade about individualism, above. Almost all attempts to undo effective Gospel ministry in the world try to individualize both the “problem” and the response to it. It is then so easy to say, “but what can one person do?” Or worse, “not MY problem.”

Almost a BFO to say that our faith calls us into community and that the Good News is overwhelmingly relational. That is certainly how the deacon sees it, experiences it, and invites others to appreciate.

And yet, there has been a strong counter current in the church. I have already cited the practice of isolating and then blaming the individual in order to disarm any attempt to name a communal or collective issue, problem, or responsibility. There is also in the core life of the church a theme or emphasis that says it is all about one’s “personal spiritual journey.” It is all about me and God, or me and Jesus; no more, no less. This is the dark side of personal affirmation in baptism—found across denominations and expressions----of “taking Jesus as one’s personal Lord and savior.” How often have you heard variations on the statement, “see what Jesus has done for YOU.” [singular] This is not, obviously a ‘bad” or “wrong” statement; except when it implicitly or explicitly excludes any relationship to, responsibility toward, or embrace of “the other.” A lot of church-affirmed piety is singular and personal. We have let some of that seep into our corporate worship. It comes as a surprise to many folk when I point out that the liturgical confession in our Eucharistic rite is for the acknowledgement of our collective, corporate, societal sins. For the personal stuff there is a whole section of the Prayer Book with two very different rites for individual confession and absolution. One of the proposed new Eucharistic rites in the *Enriching Our Worship* series adds into the worshiping body’s confession, “ forgive us the evil done on our behalf.” I have heard people vociferously object to that. In their individualism they reject any idea that they are responsible for or accountable for any collective action. I have experienced a similar outraged objection to my quoting, in a sermon, Rabbi Abraham Heschel who said, the prophet knows that “in a democratic society, while a few are guilty, all are responsible.” [To which the congregant responds, “I am not!”]

Another example of personal piety at work in common worship is in the highly personal mentions in the Prayers of the People. Little or nothing is offered by the people about war, peace, oppression, injustice, when bidden, but there is lively participation of names of individuals from personal prayer lists. I have sometimes had the unkind thought of wondering if the folk know it’s not only OK, but sort of expected that one pray for Aunt Millie’s recovery at home, any day of the week. Sunday morning is not the only, or really best time. It IS where our collective and systemic concerns can be offered in prayer. But all too often it is a hasty collection of individual concerns for individuals. The deacon should have responsibility, at some level, for the crafting and offering of the weekly prayers of the faithful. When articulated relationally in the context of community and world, these prayers clearly become the work of the people/congregation as a whole in a shared world. Many Episcopalians have yet to experience this way of relational intercession in their Sunday worship. Helping God’s people craft distinct, communal prayers in a congregation for life, and pain, and justice in a context is a liturgical function that the deacon can and should have significant impact and leadership for the congregation, but it takes care and time (and there will be resistance).

**The Diaconal Hermeneutic is—**

**• heart broken and compassionate.**

While the deacon’s view of life, world, people, symptom, system, and scripture can, and at times must, be hard-headed, it can never be or become hard hearted. That was the great sin of Israel. We need to learn and live otherwise. We must always see the beloved child of God. A simple and obvious example is to objectify the incoherent, malodorous, meth-raddled homeless guy on the doorstep while advocating vigorously for changes in law, practice, institution to take guys like him in and help them. [Hopefully, not to “fix” them, which is another pernicious temptation when facing the ills of the world.]

The linguistic core of the term ‘compassion’ is that the first syllable means “with.” This is an extension of the idea of relational, above. The diaconal hermeneutic never loses sight of our oneness, our solidarity with the persons embodying the systems of the broken world.

The deacon’s broken heart is the antidote to any hard heartedness for the deacon and in her interpreting needs, concerns, hopes.

Embracing broken-heartedness and compassion is what allows us to understand that our Gospel-based action will probably not “fix” or “solve” large systemic realities but can contribute to mitigating them. Most of all they protect us from the despair or/and cynicism that urges us to “just give up.”

Our broken-heartedness is sometimes all we can bring, and it is the deacon’s gift to invite all of God’s people to nurture supple hearts and deep compassion in the face of the seemingly insurmountable excesses of the principalities and powers.

**The Diaconal Hermeneutic is—**

**• real not theoretical.**

Systemic thinking and analysis is essential to how deacons see and hear, but it can not only feed hard heartedness but draw us into a realm of idea that abstracts us from the real that invites our thought. The diaconal hermeneutic compels the deacon and invites the congregant to make Good News happen in real time with real people.

This can be hard because when you particularize a concept it makes it easier for the fearful or the threatened to focus on and find ways to dismiss the particular and with it the larger issue. It is a narrow path, if not a tightrope, that the deacon traverses.

Perhaps this language is not helpful. More simply put, one can spend a lot of time, thought, concern, conversation, preaching about ‘homelessness,” without ever dealing with the realities of the how and the why of being without shelter, or “a home” in 21st century America. There can be meetings called, conferences attended, books read, proposals proposed and nothing ever touches the ground.

A simple example, and then I think it is time to pause for conversation. On the peninsula south of San Francisco is a very large, up-to-date veteran’s hospital. It is sited in the hills so that you never just “drive by” and see it. You have to intend to go there and when it comes into view it is impressive indeed—but obviously hidden away for a reason. A deacon who served there as a chaplain noted that as we went to war in Iraq and then Afghanistan the population of the hospital began to fill with younger and younger men and women with horrendous physical and psychological wounds that, in 20th century wars would have left them dead in the field. He noted that no one ever came to see most of them. They came from families of modest means in cities and small towns across the country. Families could only afford occasional trips. Worse, from his perspective, was that no active duty personnel stationed in the Bay Areas ever came to call either. He carried his concerns and observations to the nearby congregation in which he served as deacon. He could generate sympathetic head nods when describing the situation. But he did the clearly diaconal thing and invited the congregation to join him and call on the shattered, lonely and isolated young. That made it real. For many, too real. It also generated push back and criticism. A deacon with general ideas is one thing. A deacon inviting real engagement is another. The diaconal hermeneutic demands reality. It is where the image we borrow from Teresa of Avila who names our hands and feet as the hands, and feet of the Body of Christ, moves from theology to real hands and feet at work, engaged, and yet Gospel formed and informed.

So there it is. The Diaconal Hermeneutic is—

• Gospel based

• prophet informed

• baptismally realized

• systemic and critical

• relational

• heart broken and compassionate

• real not theoretical

**An Addendum on *The Prophetic Imagination.***

Walter Brueggemann packs a lot into his slim volume.

In terms of *The Diaconal Hermeneutic* his work overall significantly informs its “prophet informed” and “systemic and critical” dimensions. But he offers so much more.

He places Jesus’ Good News in the larger context of the history and role of the Mosaic covenant. There is a foundational hermeneutic stance of otherness from empire, royal consciousness, domination systems, Wink’s principalities and powers, that precedes, informs and grounds the Good News of Jesus and extends through two millennia to the front page of today’s *New York Times*. [cf. Walter Wink, *The Powers that Be: Theology for a New Millennium*]It is the heart of the prophetic imagination and I would say also lies at the heart of the hermeneutic we are exploring. Concisely put, on page 3 he states it thus: “The hypothesis I will explore here is this: *The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.*

*”*

This makes for hard work for North Americans (and especially deacons who are deeply embedded in our culture). Early in our history we created, embraced, and wove into founding documents and institutions that we were specially chosen by God to inhabit a “new land” which would express the Christian faith realized in earthly institutions. Or, simply put, our lot is and has been cast with the Royal Consciousness of our time and place. As recently as Ronald Regan, a president of the US has cited Jesus’ image of “the city on the hill” to affirm that this country is the embodiment of good news on earth, in our times. Christian churches in America have been largely seduced into accepting this point of view and the logically subservient and uncritical role of the church(es) in such an arrangement.

This is particularly challenging for Episcopalians and Anglicans who come from a tradition where our particular denominational expression was made “the established church” and thus the “spiritual” arm of the nation-state. Even though we “broke” with the established Church of England when the US was formed (and large numbers of “Tory” clergy fled to, and settled in, Canada) the unconscious sense of being ever-so-slightly privileged seeps into our life and consciousness even now. We, after all, still own and operate “the national cathedral” in Washington DC.

It has become fashionable in recent times for Christian voices to claim that we are “counter-cultural.” This language, as with so many things, these days has become partisanized so that it simply means I am a more authentic Christian than the Christian, “right” or “left” I disagree with. But Breuggemann is making the case that we stand with the prophets calling God’s people over and over to a way of being, loving, believing, behaving that is apart from and in no way useful to the darkness of a dominant culture.

In the middle of the last century, the great Episcopal theologian and ethicist, William Stringfellow, put it this way. We have been reading the Bible Americanly: we need to be reading America biblically.   
There are no quotation marks because I am doing this from memory. The quote is from Stringfellow’s book (which every deacon should read), *An Ethic for Christians and other Aliens in a Strange Land.*

All of this is why I think Breuggemann is so essential for a 21st century deacon.

We could do at least one whole CALL course on the book. We will connect some of it to the further development of this course in the next three weeks.