**The Diaconal Hermeneutic**

**Session Five**

**Plumb Lines and Lenses**

**Lenses: a recap**  
We have been building a construct called the Diaconal Hermeneutic that is of the essence of the Sacred Order of Deacons [and those called to it] and guides the expression of *diakonia* as ministry. This hermeneutic is a multi-faceted or prismatic lens that shapes both the deacon’s self-understanding and her mission of interpretation to others. Being multi-faceted rather than a single arcing curve [to extend the lens metaphor] we have been assembling a collection of elements of the whole from various sources.

We worked a little bit with the idea of a hermeneutic for each and all orders. We have given some attention to a way bishops and priests apprehend and interpret, but not with the kind of depth given to deacons. That is, in part, because the deacon is our primary focus. It is also because the multiplicity of ministry expressions possible for deacons stands in contrast to a more singular approach of the overseer guarding unity and the pastor gathering and feeding a flock.

The “who” to whom the deacon is to minister is particular and focused. The phrase “poor, weak, sick, and lonely” identifies particular categories of persons but also acts very much like the persistent repetition through scripture of “widow, orphan, and alien.” Both phrases call our attention to the much wider “category” of the marginalized, limited, and oppressed. These, individually and collectively, are always on the deacon’s radar screen and in her ongoing narrative.

When there was a lot in the media decades ago about the growing power and influence of what was then called “the religious right,” the now retired Bishop of California, Bill Swing, told the diocese that our call was to be the “religious left.” After letting that phrase hang in the air for a few seconds he would elaborate, “ministering with and for the left out, left over, left behind.” Very diaconal. [The usage of “left” and “right” in religious discourse has become way more toxic since the bishop played with the words, and I would say they are today useless, especially in a church context.]

The rise, in the latter part of the 20th century of liberation theology gave us the concept of God’s “preferential option for the poor.” Recently deceased Paul Farmer, creator of an amazing clinic complex in the highlands of pre-earthquake Haiti and subject of Tracy Kidder’s *Mountains Beyond Mountains* regularly used the shorthand, “O for the P” to describe his work and that to which he says we are all called.

These are examples of how a Diaconal Hermeneutic works. Many objections have been raised both to liberation theology in general and to the idea of a “preferential option” for anyone, largely by people who see a threat to themselves or their interests. One need only skim through testaments old and new to see how frequently and thematically the poor, and the iconic categories of orphan, widow, and alien appear. This wasn’t made up by some Marx-imbibing cleric in a Latin American ivory tower, though that is often what is accused. ‘O for the P’ is core gospel and it is the deacon’s gift to us to keep us awake to both the core value and the programmatic—that is, the praxis called for--particularly in our own congregations and contexts. [Tangential footnote: liberation theology is still alive and taught widely in the developing, or what Biblical scholar N.T. Wright calls the “two-thirds world. And not only in the Roman Catholic church, where it has been driven to the margins, but in Anglican seminaries in places as diverse as Brazil, the Philippines, and South Korea.

Even more tangential comment: In 2002, when the then about to be President of NAAD (precursor of AED) came back from a Worldwide Diakonia in Brazil, she brought me a tiny mug emblazoned with the Brazilian flag and the conference motto: “Diakonia = prophetic praxis.” That's about as succinct and yet complete as it gets.]

One can imagine [because it is not much realized yet in The Episcopal Church] how different life, worship, and ministry might be in a church formed by the tools and insights of liberation theology and an O for the P. I would guess that the role and leadership of the deacon might be significantly different from what we mostly see and experience. The Diaconal Hermeneutic calls the deacon always to notice and be aware of all the expressions of the “religious left.” In proclaiming, reflecting on, “modeling one’s life on,” and preaching from scripture—especially the gospels—the deacon finds the presence [or sometimes the glaring absence], stories, and imagined reactions of the marginalized threaded throughout. The deacon is always aware of, sees, and hears about connectedness, causality, and system.

The Hebrew Bible is the story of a people and God, with some individual leaders who stand out. The inter-relatedness of community is a given. Jesus launched his ministry in a very public act, called a community of followers, and spoke to the people and their rulers—albeit with stories laced with challenging individual experiences. In part because of the deep imprint of individualism in today’s U. S. culture, we more often hear Good News preached and taught as interaction between each of us as complete individuals and God/The Holy. The relationship dimension is, at best, tangential. The deacon who is constantly aware of the communal context of it all, with its attendant responsibilities, causalities, and consequences, is most often at the edge of the life and ministry of the church, if seen or heard at all. This is why the Diaconal Hermeneutic is essential, not just a nice, novel way to think about ministry.

As an immediate example, there was a quote on the web site Episcopal Café from an evangelical theology Prof. who was blessed to notice and reflect on his reactions when he was approached, while gardening, by the guy sent [in error as it turns out] to shut off the electricity. He lost it and was very rude—as we ourselves can be. He wrote, in part--

...The point of all this is that I'm coming to the conclusion that one of the demonic forces in modern life is how we are increasingly interacting with each other through bureaucratic systems. When I find myself yelling at the person in front of me it is very likely that I'm not really mad at this particular person. Rather, I'm yelling at an agent of the system. An agent who, after work is over, will go home to his or her family for dinner. And maybe he will stop off at a liquor store to get a drink to take the edge off. It was a bad day after all. Particularly that guy who was yelling and rude because his electricity got turned off...

Everyday we are in a battle to hold on to our humanity within a system that is dehumanizing us. Can we crack through the bureaucratic fog to see the flesh and blood people standing in front of us? The waiter. The manager. The return clerk. The bank teller. The secretary. The umpire/referee. The police officer. The bag boy. The financial aid officer. The tax agent. The coach. The school principal. The church staff member. The guy shutting your electricity off..."

Systems and symptoms—and how easy it is for us to personalize them and then demonize the person who is before us rather than see and understand the larger picture. It is interesting to me that the writer names this as not just unfortunate but as demonic and evil. Another whiff of principalities and powers.

**Plumb Line**

I think, by now, we can “get” why the subtitle of the course is “the deacon’s eyes and ears.” We have a sense of how central the hermeneutic is to the understanding and exercise of diaconal leadership in the church. But there is more. By now you may have had the thought that the Diaconal Hermeneutic implied that there was a “measuring stick” or expression of expected criteria of some kind that was a part of the hermeneutic at work. Indeed, there is. Not only does the deacon point to, identify, and explain in order to make everyone more aware of the religious left. The O for the P implies an imperative to act. In that imperative is value, or evaluation, or oughtness. There is a standard—something clear against which we measure something. For the deacon, where does that come from and of what does it consist?

When we looked at ecclesiology I touched on the *iconic* role of the prophet. Prophets play a pivotal role in the story of God’s people, from Moses to the final words of Malachi that presage the coming of Messiah. Jesus’ rite of passage into ministry is a baptism in the Jordan at the hand of a universally recognized and admired or feared prophet—John. Jesus himself was seen and therefore minimally understood by many of his contemporaries as a prophet. He accepted that designation while clearly implying there was more. And, as I noted before, prophecy as a charism and ministry was in the new church from its very beginnings.

The prophets invite us to look for the “what and how” of measuring sticks. We have a lot of partial or mis-understandings of prophets. They are sometimes presented and dismissed as fortune tellers. This is a bit ironic since throughout the Hebrew Bible those who are diviners, or seers, i.e. fortune tellers, are universally condemned. Since many of the prophets spoke of the promise of Messiah, a long-standing understanding in some Christian circles is that the words and tales of the prophets were all about predicting the coming of Jesus. Any serious reading of the prophets makes it clear that they are truth tellers about the power of the covenant between God and God’s chosen in their own time and place. And they clearly articulate how far the people and their leaders have fallen from any fidelity to that covenant. Sometimes this is strident, sometimes sorrowful and pleading, sometimes almost matter of fact. But always stated over against a standard—the Covenant.

My favorite metaphor for this is in the book of Amos, Chapter 7, verse 7, where he speaks to the people and their priests and princes about a “plumb line.” This is the clear measure or standard against which their lives, words, and actions are held accountable. As you probably know, a plumb line is one of the oldest forms of measurement in human history. It is utterly simple—a line with a weight on one end. When held out by the end of the string or twine, the weight pulls the line directly toward the center of the earth. Any pole, post, or house beam aligned with the plumb line [hence “a – ligned”] will be perfectly vertical; as straight up and down as is possible. When a plumb line is used today, and it is still used since no one has ever improved upon it, the resulting work—post, building, etc.—is said to be “in true.”

The prophet, and today the deacon, with a plumb line is naming what is true and then pointing to or calling attention to all that is “out of line,” fallen away, untrue. This is what is involved when we speak of the deacon’s “prophetic voice” as a dimension of the deacon’s interpretation of needs, concerns, and hopes. The deacon with acute eyes and ears sees and hears what is—the truth of a situation—and then calls attention to how far out of true are the community, the church, the world.

One further element, which is starkly stated by Amos, is that the plumb line is the covenant with the One creating—and for us now, redeeming and enlivening—God and being in right relationship with each other. This is named as justice. Justice is seen as God acting in the world and community to set aright—back in true—that which has fallen away, or more likely, corrupted and abused by some at the expense, abuse, and oppression of others. Relational justice is as ancient as the great prayer of the *Shema* and as contemporary as our 21st century concept of “fundamental fairness.”

The plumb line, wielded by the prophet and informing the deacon, not only calls and recalls God’s people into a relationship of love, awe, worship, and faithfulness but also calls God’s people into right relationship with each other. This means not exploiting the poor, the orphan, the widow, the alien—our now familiar iconic place-holders—and not misusing power and systems of power. It means seeking peace rather than violence—even with all the bloody-mindedness of some of the Hebrew Bible notwithstanding.

The Diaconal Hermeneutic has not only tools for analysis and words for interpretation, but a vital standard of measurement which shapes the act and art of interpretation, informs the defining and enacting of ministry, and stands as the constant, if not the only, point of accountability in and to the gospel, the Good News. The Diaconal Hermeneutic wields a plumb line.

And so what is that plumb line for us all, and especially the deacon?!?!?

Like any series, this is tantalizingly where we will focus next week.