

Deacons as Sacraments of the Table

Dwight W. and Linda J. Vogel

The role of the deacon in the United Methodist Church today is related to three tables that are central to the experience of the New Testament church: the table of service, the table of justice, and the table of grace. All three tables are sacramental in nature and deacons are themselves sacraments of service, justice and grace.

The Three Tables as Diaconal Paradigm

Let us begin by recalling three events having to do with tables in the New Testament narratives which can provide a paradigm for our understanding the vocation and mission of the deacon today. In the Johannine account of Jesus' last meal with his disciples, Jesus

got up from table, removed his outer garments and, taking a towel, wrapped it round his waist; he then poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel he was wearing. . . . When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments again he went back to the table. "Do you understand," he said "what I have done for you? . . . If I, then, the Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you must wash each other's feet. I have given you an example so that you may copy what I have done to you."

[John 13:4-5, 12, 14-15 NEB]

This is the table of service, and this model of "towel and basin ministry" is central to diaconal vocation and mission. Whether the primary location of that ministry is "in the Church" or "in the world," the concept of service permeates the life and work of a deacon.

The context for the second event is found in Acts where we read that the early disciples "shared their food gladly and generously" [Acts 2:46b]. However, in chapter 6 we discover that the number of disciples was increasing, and the Hellenists registered a complaint against the Hebrews: their own widows were being overlooked. The issue is one of justice. The solution, we know, was to appoint seven to this ministry through prayer and the laying on of hands. While we must recognize that neither the office of deacon, nor the rite of ordination as such had developed at this point, still we find here a model for the later development of both. This event has to do with the "justice table." Persons are set apart by the community of faith through a sign/act and commissioned to a ministry of justice.

When we speak of a sacrament of the table, it is the third event which Christians most readily call to mind. In the synoptic gospels as well as in Paul, the story of Jesus' last meal with his disciples in which Jesus

took bread and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me." He did the same with the cup after supper and said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood poured out for you."

[Luke 22:19-20; cf. Matthew 26:26-28, Mark 14:22-24, and I Corinthians 11:23-25]

This is the table of grace, set in the context of thanksgiving [eucharist] and the new covenant. Here the Church has learned and celebrated who it is and what it is called to be and do.

While it has been helpful to recall each story separately and to speak of the table of service, the table of justice, and the table of grace, we need to remind ourselves that these are not three separate tables. The table of service and the table of grace are both based in the story of the last supper. The table of justice resulted from inadequately living out the implications of that holy meal. Thus, there are not three tables, but one table--Christ's table. By recognizing these three components, however, we avoid a reductionism which focuses on only one of the stories without recognizing the interrelationship of all three.

The vocation and mission of the deacon has to do with service, with justice, and with grace. Their ministry is that of Christ's table, and it is a sacramental ministry.

Christ's Table of Service, Justice and Grace as Sacrament

A sacrament is a "sacred sign" or a "visible word" (Augustine). In a sacrament, a reality beyond our immediate apprehension is perceived by our senses. What we perceive is a sign of something more than what is immediately at hand. In them, a mysterious and transcendent reality comes into the world of our experience through signs/acts we perceive. A sacrament is

a perceptible symbol of the sacred, both in and beyond sense perception. We call this sacred reality *grace*--God's free gift of love and care. Sacraments not only point to this grace but also become ways through which we receive this gift of God's life-transforming love.¹

The symbols themselves are polyvalent, with many layers of meaning defying precise identification. That to which a sacrament points is greater and deeper and richer than what we perceive. But the sacrament opens us up to that mystery which is in and yet beyond it.

When Jesus took the towel and basin, he was not only removing the dust of the road from his disciple's feet. It is a sign of the nature of his own ministry, and it has implications for the ministry of disciples who follow him. When Jesus shares bread and the cup at the last supper, he is not primarily addressing the physical hunger and thirst of the disciples. It is a sign of the new covenant, a community established and sustained by God's grace. When the seven are set apart to meet the needs of a group being ignored by the ministry of the Church, it is not merely a way of dealing with a particular

¹ Dwight W. Vogel and Linda J. Vogel, *Sacramental Living: Falling Stars and Coloring Outside the Lines* (Upper Room Books, 1999), p. 22.

problem at a particular time in a particular place. Rather, it embodies the ministry of justice as intrinsic to the life and mission of the Church.

While our tradition has called the ritual act based on the last supper a sacrament, it has not used that term for footwashing (a practice also “mandated” by Jesus), or the laying on of hands as persons are set apart for ministry. Yet to appropriate the sacrament of grace without regard to service or justice is to misunderstand the new covenant celebrated in the Eucharist. Indeed, seeing the table of grace apart from its implications for community, service and justice calls forth Paul’s critique of the early church’s proto-eucharistic practice (cf. I Corinthians 11:17-34).

How can the Church today recognize the unity of these elements for their own life of faith? How can the liturgical celebration of the Eucharist inform us about who we are and what we are called to be and do?

The Deacon as Sacrament

Contemporary sacramental theology has recognized that Christ is the sacrament of the presence of God, and that the Church is the sacrament of the presence of Christ. We are learning to think in broader and richer ways of the nature of sacrament. We believe that the deacon can serve as sacrament to the Church and for the Church.

Deacons are “sacred signs” and “visible words” of the unity of service and justice with the ministry of grace. Through embodying that unity in their own ministry, the Church can perceive in and through them a reality beyond our immediate apprehension. Deacons are a sign of more than themselves, more than their “office,” more than their particular form of ministry. In them, some very identifiable attributes of this mysterious and transcendent reality we call God comes into the world of our experience. We recognize God as a justice seeking, grace giving, service empowering God.

Deacons become for us a perceptible symbol of the presence of God and that to which God calls us, both in and beyond sense perception. They not only point to the implications of receiving God’s grace but are themselves ways through which we receive the gift of God’s life-transforming, justice seeking, service empowering love.

This understanding of Deacon as Sacrament reminds us of the fact that we could do a parallel analysis for elders as well as for the ministry of all baptized. That to which the understanding of each of them as sacrament points is greater and deeper and richer than what we perceive. But seeing one another as sacraments of Christ opens us up to a mystery which is in and yet beyond any one of us alone, and all of us together.

Implications for the Function and Role of Deacons

Worship is the epiphany of the Church. In it we discover, celebrate and become who we are called to be. The function and role of deacons in many areas of the Church’s life need continuing attention. While recognizing the importance of arenas of

diaconal ministry both in and beyond the Church, we want to focus on the role of the deacon in the worship life of the Church.

Deacons need to be visibly involved in worship, not for their own sake, but for the sake of the Church and for the life of the world. They represent (literally “re-present), in a specific and embodied way, the service and justice ministries intrinsic to the life of the Church and the necessary connection between the Church and the world. To the extent that the worshippers understand the work of the deacon, and to the extent that it is made clear that the deacon’s role is not one of convenience (“someone needs to read this lesson”) or authority (“only a deacon should ever pray this prayer”), the sacramental role of the deacon will enrich the Church’s understanding of its own life and mission.

Tradition gives us some clues, but a contemporary reflection on the depth dynamics of worship is making clear what some of these functions can be: The deacon calls us from the world to worship while remembering the world as we worship. The deacon proclaims the gospel. The deacon leads in the prayers of intercession. The deacon sends the Church at worship out to be the Church at work in the world. These and other places in the worship of the Church are natural points at which the deacon’s ministry can be sacramental to and for the Church. In our own ministry, regular diaconal participation in worship leadership has been important for our congregation’s understanding of both the ministry of the diaconate and the diaconal nature of their own ministry.

For us, this has also meant sharing the ministry of the Table--not only the table of service and the table of justice, but precisely because these are intrinsic to our understanding of Eucharist, the ministry of the Lord’s Table. In so doing we want to share some of our underlying convictions.

Basic for us is the belief that the Church is the Body of Christ; indeed, a particular congregation is the Body of Christ. Coupling that affirmation with the reformation insistence on the priesthood of all believers, we do not see the presider as one who “represents” Christ. Representing Christ is the task of the entire worshipping community. That has led us to two implications for eucharistic practice: the great thanksgiving does not belong to the elder; it belongs to the Church. The importance of the “Amen” at the end of the prayer as a way early congregations had of making the prayer their own points in this direction. The inclusion of the opening dialogue and the congregational responses are additional indicators. So when there are phrases that talk about what “we” do together, there is no theological reason why the congregation should not say them when and where it is appropriate. The second implication is that, contrary to the prescriptions of some of our colleagues in liturgical and sacramental scholarship, we see no compelling reason why all of the great thanksgiving must be prayed by the presider. Thus, we would encourage the inclusion of the deacon in praying parts of the prayer (the preface and/or the “we” sections, for example) and in joining with the presider in the doxology at the end of the prayer.

If what we have said about the unity of the table is true, and if the deacon is sacrament of the Church for the world, and a sacrament of the world for the Church, what can be the role of the deacon in providing sacramental worship in the absence of an elder?

Dwight was ordained an elder in the Evangelical United Brethren Church. The fact that he was never ordained a deacon and has never felt that impoverished his ministry is part of the social location contributing to our perspective! He recalls that one of the last actions of each annual conference was a motion authorizing the active probationers to administer the sacraments. From Mr. Strawbridge (in Bishop Asbury's day) down to the present, the denomination has found good reason to give "sacramental rights" to some of its ministers who are not ordained elders: "transitional" deacons under appointment, local pastors, and student pastors among them. Yet there is a concern for some "gate-keeping" to take place which leads to some strange requirements, and not a few strange practices. We cite these examples only to confirm that the sacraments do not "belong" to elders, but rather to the Church who can decide who can celebrate the sacraments, when, and where.

For the sake of the mission of the Church in the world, we believe the denomination should reflect on the wisdom of allowing a bishop to authorize deacons serving "in the world" to celebrate the sacraments in the places of their ministry when that is appropriate. This could include chaplains in hospitals and prisons or community workers in un-churched neighborhoods. For the sake of the life of the Church, we believe the denomination should reflect on the wisdom of allowing a pastor or a district superintendent to authorize deacons serving in churches to celebrate sacraments in settings where that is appropriate. There are dangers to be guarded against to be sure: the tendency of the Church to allow Eucharists in fragmented groups to replace the celebration by the whole community, or the shirking of responsibility by the Church for its ministry to the un-churched as a congregation. Yet the present situation is not without its own abuses and irrational practices.

Perhaps we should be reminded of one other part of the story. Stephen, you remember, was set apart as one of the seven to deal with a ministry of justice in meeting the needs of the forgotten widows. At least that's what the community of faith thought he was being called to do. It turns out that God had even more in mind for him. He ends up preaching, and Saul of Tarsus hears him. The old wineskins weren't strong enough to contain the new wine of God's spirit!

We believe it is part of the role of the Deacon as Sacrament that the institutional church will never quite be able to get them to stay "in their place." That is true, not because they seek power or glory (becoming a deacon is not a wise choice for someone with that agenda). It is because the life-transforming grace of God which calls deacons into ministry is always pushing at the boundaries, finding new avenues of service, new calls for justice, new channels of ministry. The wind blows where it will, and neither the gates of hell nor the restrictions of the institutional church can prevail against the Spirit of God.

It would be far better, we believe, for us to seek to discern what the Spirit is saying to the churches regarded those called to be deacons, affirming them as Sacraments of the world to the Church and of the Church to the world.

©2006, Dwight and Linda Vogel

May be reproduced for teaching and learning by including these lines.