



Celebrating witness expressed through service (*diakonia*) and leadership offered by the ELCIC's diaconal ministers.

Do you intend to continue in the covenant God made with you in holy baptism: to serve all people, following the example of Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth? — **Affirmation of Baptism, EvLW p. 23**

TEXT: Isaiah 55:1-9 Psalm 63:1-8 1 Corinthians 10:1-13 Luke 13:1-9

our gospel story this morning we see Jesus traveling through the towns and villages, teaching in the synagogues along the way, telling parables and healing people, making his way towards Jerusalem and his eventual arrest and execution. Luke shows us that even in Jesus' day people followed current events, avidly discussed the latest news of death and destruction, and tried to understand its significance. In this passage Jesus speaks to the crowds about two recent happenings in Jerusalem. The first was a slaughter in the temple. Pilate had ordered his soldiers to enter the temple while some Galileans were there offering sacrifices. The soldiers killed the pilgrims with their swords—for what reason we don't know. The second was the story of a construction accident: the collapse of the tower of Siloam. A supporting beam or stone gave way and the building fell, killing eighteen workers.

Whenever bad things happen, whenever senseless deaths occur, the human instinct is to try to make sense of it, to answer the difficult question, WHY? And if we can't make sense of events, then we have to believe that justice is somehow being served, in a way we just can't see. Our fairy tales, TV shows and movies all follow the same plot line of heroes and villains who get their just rewards. We want a world in which bad people get the punishment they deserve and good people live happily ever after. Anything else just doesn't make sense and upsets our sense of justice and what's "fair."

Rabbi Harold Kushner, who wrote the classic book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, says "It is tempting at one level to believe that bad things happen to people (especially to other people) because God is a righteous judge who gives them what they deserve. By believing that, we keep the world orderly and understandable."

In our gospel lesson, Jesus addressed the same assumptions from people of Jerusalem. He challenged their conventional thinking, bursting the balloon that says, "People get what they deserve." Jesus made it clear that when people die in tragedies it's not because they are bad people, or that God doesn't love them. Jesus said those people who died tragically in Jerusalem were no worse than anyone else. Jesus also challenged the people's view of God as an angry judge, weighing each bad deed and then doling out the corresponding punishment of sickness, death and tragedy. This is the way the people of Jerusalem thought of God in Jesus' day, and this is the way that some people still see God in our day. God punishes those who deserve it—either in this life or the next.



What was the lesson about the fig tree? Jesus used the symbol of the fig tree, a common symbol that in his day represented the nation of Israel. But a fruit tree is an image that we can understand here in Canada too; we have places where fruit trees are plentiful, growing apples, peaches, cherries, plums and other wonderful fruits. A tree that bears fruit is a gift to the world. A tree that bears no fruit is still a tree, but it is a tree that has forgotten its reason for being. It may be beautiful, it may give shade, but it isn't living up to its purpose—the purpose for which it was created. In his parable Jesus was calling the people of Israel to be trees bearing good fruit. He was calling them to be self-reflective, to turn their lives around, and to repent.

Jesus also showed the people an alternative picture of God. It's easy to imagine God in the role of the owner of the field, surveying his land, judging the worth of the crops, and demanding the unfruitful tree to be cut down. But in this parable Jesus is showing us God in a very different role—as a defender, an advocate, a nurturing gardener, pleading for another chance to dig up the barren fig tree, to fertilize it, and tend it, to give it a year of TLC, to lovingly coax it to bear fruit. Here Jesus shows us a God who is more than just a judge, but rather one who has a vision for what the tree could be, one who sees a tree that CAN and WILL bear fruit, and so actively labours over it to make it fruitful. Remember last week, we got an alternative picture of God as a mother hen, sheltering her chicks from harm? This week our gospel shows us another positive image of a loving God who sees the hope within us, the image of fruitfulness for which we were created. It shows a God with hands that are work-worn and calloused, strong, but also gentle; hands that are willing to get dirty, to prune where they must, to dig the weeds and feed the soil, and tease life out of the barren earth.

So what was Jesus trying to teach the people? What was his message to them...and to us?

I think Jesus really wanted them to see God as he did: as a loving God, a tender God, one in whom they could place their trust. And he wanted them to enter into a relationship with God, to bear fruit of that relationship, the fruit of love and caring. Jesus was saying God wants us to live in a partnership with God—like a dance partner or a marriage partner. God calls us and woos us into this relationship. God wants us to be focused on God so focused that we look to God for every move we make; so focused that we never stop thinking about our relationship with God—and our relationship with God's people; so focused that we are ever alert to the needs of God's people wherever we look, and are ready to be the face and hands of God's love to the world.

Today is Diaconal Sunday in Lutheran churches across Canada. Today we remember the particular work of diaconal ministers and deacons, and the call to a ministry of Word and Service. The word "diaconal" comes from the word diakonia. It's a Greek word that means literally "going down into the dust"—like a slave or servant who sweeps the floor or washes feet. Not a very glamorous job description by today's standards, but a very important calling all the same.

When I think about the image of the gardener in today's gospel, I think this is a good symbol for diaconal ministry as well. There's not anything radically special or unique about the men and women who are called to diaconal

DIACONAL SUNDAY SERMON February 28, 2016



ministry—they're just ordinary people—people just like you and me. Deacons are baptized Christians, followers of Jesus, who have learned the gospel stories and know personally about the love of God and what it means to be accepted for who they are. They know what it means to be gathered in and to be nurtured by Word and Sacrament, and they know the security of being in relationship with God—in God's tender hands. They also know what it means to be sent out with a purpose into the world, to teach and to heal in Jesus' name, to share the love of God with others, to tell their stories, and to make disciples. Diaconal ministers have both the experience of being the wilted plant in the healing hands of God the gardener, and the training to be gardeners who do the pruning and the fertilizing. Fortunately, most deacons aren't afraid to get a little manure on them.

Who do we tend as gardeners? Well certainly the young ones, the hurt ones, the lonely; those who are marginalized by society because of class or race, age or ability; those who are victims of systemic injustice, or entrenched in cycles of poverty, abuse and addiction; those who are mentally or physically unwell; those who are homeless or hopeless.

How do we help? That depends on the God-given gifts of the particular deacon and his or her training. Some deacons are teachers, some are musicians, some do parish administration, or community organization. Others work as chaplains or spiritual directors or youth workers. In my ministry at St. David's I run Harmony Centre, our counselling outreach, so I work with people who are having troubles coping with life changes, or regulating their emotions, and I help people build stronger relationships with partners, friends and family.

Last year in February, I attended the Anglican Diocese of Toronto's Deacon's Gathering at which Archbishop Colin Johnson was our guest speaker. The archbishop reminded us that the role of the deacon is to be sent out into the world 1) to articulate the God story (the good news of God's love) and 2) to discern the needs of the community, and bring that information back to the church. All of us are rooted in communities: our workplaces, our schools, our neighbourhoods, our families, our cities. What is happening in our community and what needs to happen so that all people have food, shelter and security, so that all of them feel loved and equipped to go out into the world? That is part of the discernment that we need to do as deacons...and as Christians. Because another part of my job as deacon is to remind YOU about the ministry that we all share here: diakonia is not the work of deacons only; it is the work of all the baptized! That means it's my work, but it's also your work too. When we open our hearts and eyes to the needs of our community, what do we see? Where are the opportunities to reach out in service, in diakonia, to each other and the world?

Now some of you might be thinking, "I'm not equipped to do the job of a deacon," but really, yes, you are! You have been in training since your baptism. Being diaconal is not so very difficult. It's more about attitude than it is about ability. It's about standing with those who feel as if they have been pushed to the margins of society. It's about responding to grief and pain with compassion and hope; about speaking truth to power and naming the evils in our world. It's about identifying systemic injustice and working towards change and reconciliation. It's about being grounded in God and in prayer. It's about telling the stories of God and using the symbols of



faith to teach and encourage people. It's a call to proclaiming God's word and extending a hand of service to those who sometimes seem like wilted plants in need of watering. You know deep down in your heart—in your diaconal heart—when things are not right, when justice is not served, when someone needs help. You know how to help, and you want to help. I know you do.

Jesus calls us to be fruitful for God, bearing fruit of love and compassion. Lent is a time to examine ourselves and see if our lives are full and flowering. It's a time to be self-reflective, to ask ourselves: Do our lives have meaning? Do we make a difference in our communities, our families, our circles of influence? Are we fruitful for God? Or are our branches bare and our growth stunted? If we discover we are like the barren fig tree, then it is time for us to call on God the good gardener, to ask God to care for us, to nourish us on the Word, to water us with the Holy Spirit, to feed us with the body and blood of Jesus, and to dig around us and prune us, removing anything that is harmful to us.

At the end of our deacon's gathering last year, Archbishop Colin Johnson gave us some words of inspiration and encouragement. He reminded us of the words of dismissal that deacons say to the congregation at the end of each worship: "Go into the world to love and serve the Lord." That's our calling—all of us, as baptized people to be gathered in, tended by God's loving hands until we are ready to be fruitful, ready to be sent out to love and serve God's people in the world. Not just in the church—in the whole world.

Jesus' parable today in Luke is a stark reminder that human life is fleeting and we never know when violence will snuff us out or a building will fall on us. A priest colleague of mine used to end her worship services with this blessing from the poet Henri-Frederic Amiel:

"Life is short and we have too little time to gladden the hearts of those who travel the way with us. So, be swift to love; make haste to be kind....and may the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with you now and always."

These powerful words seem most appropriate for our journey as baptized Christians together in this world—be swift to love, make haste to be kind, rest in God's tender hands, and offer your hand to others along the way. That is our baptismal calling, our diaconal calling—to love and serve the world in God's name. Amen.

Deacon Pamela Harrington St. David's Anglican Lutheran Church, Orillia, ON