

**A Sermon given by the Rt. Rev. Dr. Geoff Peddle at the Opening Service of the Twentieth-Ninth  
Diocesan Synod of the Diocese of Eastern Newfoundland and Labrador, April 21, 2016**

In the Name of God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit ...

It is a privilege tonight to deliver this sermon in this Church of the Ascension at the beginning of our Twenty-Ninth Diocesan Synod and my second as Diocesan Bishop. From a Greek word meaning “council” or “assembly,” a synod is a gathering of church leaders to discuss matters of faith, administration or doctrine. Synods were originally meetings of bishops but today include priests, deacons and lay members. This synod even includes people from beyond our church. Tonight and tomorrow delegates and observers from Labrador and from Newfoundland, from outports and from cities, from coastal communities and from inland communities representing every age group, and every station in life, are here.

The theme of synod this year is “**The Church has left the Building: Recognizing the Gospel beyond the Visible Church.**” This year’s synod is a call for us to recognize the Gospel beyond the institutional church even as we care for the church we know so well and love.

Although we begin our synod here at the Church of the Ascension, we will also spend time at the Church of the Good Shepherd, and also at the Church of St. Mary the Virgin. These are considered mother, daughter and granddaughter churches for it was St. Mary’s that gave birth to the Ascension, which in turn gave birth to the Good Shepherd. That is how the church grows. We are family.

I welcome many special visitors to this year’s synod and they include partners in our work. Those partners are both faith-based and secular who share with us a passion for community and justice and whose missions come together with ours in important ways. We welcome Bishop Lawrence Provenzano of the Diocese of Long Island in New York State who will be with us throughout synod and speak at our dinner on Saturday night. We welcome Ms. Leslie Giddings of the Diocese of Ottawa who will facilitate much of our conversation over the next three days on our three themes of **Dreaming, Celebrating and Sharing** and who will preach at our closing service on Sunday. And finally, in the very front of our church tonight, we welcome six candidates for ordination who will become Deacons in the Church of God before we conclude this service.

Tonight, we focus upon the ministry of Deacons as **Barbara, Christine, Derrick, Douglas, Lisa, and Verna** are empowered for a new role. The words of the Ordination Service describe the ministry of a Deacon as a special one of servanthood in which a Deacon is called to serve all people, particularly the poor, the weak, the sick, and the lonely. In so very many ways the ministry of a Deacon is the most humble profession of all in the church. It is also the most “frontline” ministry of the church. It is not an office with any great glory attached to it, nor should it be. A Deacon is to show God’s love to this broken and hurting world through service and humility.

I love the pulpit here at the Church of the Ascension. I preached from it for ten years when I served in this parish. There are quite a few pulpits in our diocese and no two are alike. Some are grand and high and enable the preacher to look down upon the people from a lofty and protected perch. Others are low, almost at the level of the people. Some are in between, neither high nor low, but sufficient for the preacher to be heard and seen, lending dignity to the Word of God. This one here, for me, is just right. To borrow from the story of Goldilocks, this pulpit is neither too high nor too low, neither too grand nor too plain, but just right for me.

One of the reasons pulpits are made as they are is to give dignity and prominence to the Word of God. The preacher was elevated to accomplish that.

And yet today many of us quite regularly preach from the center aisle of our churches, coming much closer to the people and some of us even engage in “dialogue sermons” with adults or “theme conversations” with children as part of our preaching and teaching. That can make the preacher both accessible and vulnerable when you think about it.

**When a preacher leaves a pulpit to be among the people they change their relationship with their listeners.**

**When God left heaven to be among us in Jesus he forever changed his relationship with the world.**

Holy Scripture tells us God’s home is in the heavenly realms and yet in Jesus Christ he became one of us, revealing a vulnerability that was ultimately to bring about crucifixion, death and resurrection. In Jesus, God left the safety of heaven and showed us how to live with his actions of mercy and love, even stooping to wash the feet of disciples to demonstrate servanthood. Scripture also tells us that when Jesus ascended back into heaven – an event this Church of the Ascension is named after! – He sent the Holy Spirit so that his work would continue in the Church and beyond.

The Anglican Church in Eastern Newfoundland and Labrador can no longer claim a lofty and protected place in society but must be fully part of the world around us with no privilege save the Gospel and no shelter save faith. It would be very easy for us to long for “the good old days” of the Church as we remember them but truthfully, those ideal “good old days” probably exist mainly in our memories. Life then, as life now, was messy and difficult in its own way. God chose to enter our messy and difficult world in the person of Jesus Christ. And in the Church, and in the world outside the Church, with all of their imperfections and shortcomings, we encounter God daily. The Church is actually God’s chosen instrument for healing the world.

With the recent news of our Provincial Budget and downturn in our economy there is a need for faith communities like churches to be instruments of healing. We cannot always look to government to fix our problems and now is a time for our church to be very close to the people and walk closely with all who are in pain and uncertainty and anxiety. In light of this and all our other new and expanding ministries of recent years it may well be that God is shaping us to be a Servant Church.

In Jesus, God chose to meet us right where we are on our own terms as humans. He entered into our messy world and asks to be part of our messy lives. He understood that this life is not always easy and he came to share our journey. God gave us the gift of himself in Christ so that we may never struggle alone.

That pretty much outlines the ministry of a deacon in as far as it is a ministry of presence, vulnerability and servanthood among the people. It is a vulnerable and open ministry where your only defense is the Gospel and your only protection is faith. It is a ministry “out in the world” as you encounter it. It is a ministry of servanthood necessary for a Servant Church.

The Gospel reading for this evening is one in which Jesus issues an unusual invitation that we still struggle with. It is an invitation in which Jesus uses the imagery of one who is tired finding rest for their souls in an unexpected place. It is a good reading for Deacons to recall as they are ordained:

***“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:25-30)***

Jesus, no doubt, was very familiar with the image of oxen or other draft animals yoked together. His part of the world had many farms, which needed animals to carry out the tasks that human beings were not strong enough to perform. Often, not one animal is used, but two, harnessed together by a wooden frame, which fitted over

their necks, thereby doubling the amount of animal power available to the farmer for the task at hand. This wooden frame, or yoke, also placed them more firmly under the control of the person leading them.

***“Come to me (Jesus says), all you that are weary and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”***

This Gospel provides us with an interesting and seemingly contradictory mix of images. On the one hand we hear Jesus inviting the “weary” and the “heavy laden” to come to him for he is “gentle and humble” and will give them rest for their souls. But on the other hand we hear Jesus inviting them to take his yoke. And even though Jesus describes his yoke as “easy” and his burden as “light,” a yoke is still a yoke, and a burden is still a burden.

Does Jesus make any sense with his invitation to rest and work at the same time? He does if we understand that there are two kinds of yokes and two kinds of work. In this Gospel Jesus invites all people to turn away from their old lives and their old burdens – burdens that make them feel “weary” and “heavy laden.” And his yoke, unlike the yoke offered by other religious leaders of his day that was one of works and laws, is one of grace and faith. Jesus’ yoke is easy and his burden light by comparison.

Jesus offers a new life based upon a personal relationship with him symbolized by taking his yoke. The rest that Jesus promised, the rest that he offered, was the peace of mind that came from knowing and serving God in Him through faith.

In our service tonight the Deacons will all receive a stole that is worn over their shoulder and pinned on the side. Although the wearing of stoles probably originated in the scarf of office for officials in the Roman Empire as a way of conveying their authority and responsibility, Christians adopted stoles as “badges of office” for Deacons and Priests. The stole was sometimes associated with the towel used by Jesus when he washed the feet of his disciples and became a symbol of humble service. Some writers have referred to the stole as representing the “yoke of Christ.” The stoles about to be worn by these new Deacons are symbolic of that yoke and visible reminders of their service and commitment to Him. Stoles and the Deacons who wear them represent the ultimate humility and service.

**In today’s Gospel the invitation of Jesus is open: “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”**

**In today’s Gospel the expectation of Jesus is clear: “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart ...”**

**And finally, in today’s Gospel, the promise of Jesus is eternal: “For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light, and you will find rest for your souls.”**

And so, with Jesus’ words in mind, let us proceed to the ordination of the newest Deacons in his Church ...