

2 Epiphany, Year A (RCL) – *Responding to the Call*
Isaiah 49:1-7; 1 Corinthians 1:1-9; John 1:29-42; Psalm 40:1-12
The Rev. Skip Bushee – 1/20/08

This morning's lessons are all about God's call.

Isaiah talks about hearing a call from his mother's womb. Well, that seems a bit early for most of us. Few of us respond to God's call until well into adulthood, or like me, they wait until late middle age.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul talks about his call and the call of all the faithful to be in fellowship with Jesus Christ.

Lastly, our Gospel lesson tells of John the Baptist, himself called to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah, who announces to two of his followers that the man in their midst is the Lamb of God. This proclamation turns into a call for Andrew and his brother, Simon Peter, to become Jesus' first apostles.

So what is this "call" business all about?

Well, as Paul stated in First Corinthians, Each and every one of us, by virtue of our baptism into the faith has a call. Our Baptismal Covenant states it clearly: we are all called to proclaim the "Good News of God in Christ," to "seek and serve Christ in all persons," and to "strive for justice and peace among all people." Spread the Good News, look for and serve the Christ in all people, good and bad, and seek world justice – that's a pretty tall order. Where would we even begin?

That's where the deacon comes in. The job of the deacon is to get us off of our backsides and lead us out into the world to perform these ministries. Deacons are called to organize and lead all baptized persons to build and support servant ministries.

The diaconate is actually the oldest order of ordained ministry. If you read Acts Chapter 6, you will learn that in the early days of the Church, the Apostles were so busy preaching and spreading the Gospel that they had no time to pay attention to the needs of the widows and orphans. They said that it would not be right for them to "neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables," so they asked their followers to select from among themselves "seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom." And so the diaconate was born with the humble but holy task of serving the poor, the weak, the sick, and the lonely.

In the early days of the church, deacons were very powerful. Because it was their task to distribute alms to the poor, they controlled the treasuries. Then as now, deacons worked directly for bishops, including the bishop of Rome. I suspect that it was this power that led to the downfall of the order so that the diaconate virtually ceased to exist for nearly 1500 years.

The other important factor that led to the decline of the diaconate was that as the church became more powerful, virtually everyone was a member of the church. People depended on the church for everything – their social lives, their personal conduct, their legal and family affairs – all was controlled by the church. Under this system, all ministry happened within the church, controlled and administered by an expanding priesthood, and there was no need either for lay ministries out in the world or for deacons to provide leadership for those ministries.

However, within the last 100 years or so, all has changed. Today, with the expansion of mass media and the development of new forms of entertainment, with both parents in the work force and the need for weekend family time, the church is no longer the center of society. In fact, nationally only about 10 percent of the population attends church, mosque or synagogue each week. The old model of ministry with the church at the center is no longer valid.

In today's world, those of us who are part of a church community, such as this one at St. Peter's, are all called to be ministers of God's word. The church is a place of sanctuary and sustenance for us each week to prepare us for our ministries in the wider world. And that is why I believe that a strong diaconate is essential if the church is to survive and thrive in the 21st century. We desperately need leaders who will stand at the door and beckon each of us to go out into the world as ministers of God's love and grace.

There are still many parishes within our diocese that lack an ordained deacon even though the three dioceses in Northern California are blessed with the premier diaconal training program in the country – the Episcopal School for Deacons in Berkeley – and as a result have more and better trained deacons in place than anywhere else.

One challenge we face is that the diaconate remains misunderstood. We are still saddled with the perception that the diaconate is a “lesser order” because priests are still required to spend six months as a “transitional deacon” before being ordained to the priesthood. I prefer to call this requirement as a “transitional priesthood” because that is what it really is. I can't tell you how many people still come up to me and ask, “When do you plan to go ‘all the way’ and become a priest?” My answer is that I have already gone all the way; I am a deacon. My calling is to the diaconate. It is where my passion lies because I believe it to be the vanguard of a new movement in the church and while I value and cherish the priesthood, it is not my calling.

The deacon's role in the Sunday service is highly symbolic of our role as servant ministry leaders and role models. You will notice that we normally do three things each Sunday. First, we proclaim the Gospel, not from the lectern but always in the midst of the people and always facing the outside world. Second, we model servant ministry by setting the table for Eucharist. Finally, at the end of the service, we always send the congregation forth to do the Lord's work in the wider world.

What we do not do is consecrate the Eucharist. This is important because it uplifts the essential role of the priest as the convener of the Eucharist and the leader of the gathered

church. The priest is the one who calls us together in community so that we may all be fed to enable us to do God's work in the world. The deacon is the one who stands at the door of the church and calls us out of our slumber and into the wider world to proclaim by word and action, the "Good news of God in Christ."

I would be willing to bet that if you look around you will see that there are some among us who provide lay leadership for the various ministries of the church, both the internal ministries, such as altar guild and lay Eucharistic ministries, as well as your outreach ministries, such as Maple Street, IHN and Hopkins Manor. As a congregation, we need to begin a dialog with these people to see if they are ready to take the next step, to begin the discernment process possibly leading toward ordination as a deacon. My guess is that you will find people who, like myself a few years ago, will decide to go to the School for Deacons simply to further their theological education as a way to enhance their lay ministries. That's fine. For me, it was only with time that I came to realize my calling to ordained ministry and I suspect many would feel the same.

So today, I challenge us as a congregation to put together a committee to identify and begin a dialog with those in our midst who have promise as leaders in servant ministry. I assure you that they will be welcomed with open arms at the School for Deacons.

Also, to continue this dialog, I will be showing a 24-minute documentary, entitled "Called to Love and Serve" in the Library shortly after this service. This short video was produced last year entirely by students at the School for Deacons and provides a great summary of what deacons do in the world. I hope you will grab a cup of coffee or tea and join me in watching this outstanding video.

Finally, let me express my heartfelt thanks to all of you for the tremendous support you have given me in nearly six years as your deacon. The love and understanding I have received from all of you has helped me grow and enabled me to put my full energies into supporting my ministries, including the Stanford Chaplaincy and the School for Deacons, as well as the ministries we do together, like Hopkins Manor and Maple Street. I couldn't do it without you.