

LAWRENCE THE DEACON
Sermon for St. Lawrence Day
LPC, 8/11/13

Today we celebrate our unofficial patron saint, Lawrence. In some places you see Lawrence with a “u”: that is the Latinized spelling, which considering that Lawrence was a Latin speaker, makes sense. The “w” version is the Anglicized version. Since we spell Lawrencefield with a “w,” it has come to make more sense to me to use that version. Laurence or Lawrence, it is the same person.

His patronage is unofficial because this church was never formally dedicated to St. Lawrence. Your vestry and I just decided some years ago that we needed a patron saint as an excuse to hold an annual party. Lawrence was the logical choice, since his name is part of our name. His martyrdom on a grill also seemed a good tie-in for our first St. Lawrence Day celebration seven years ago, when we had a barbecue. Perhaps this is a rather macabre connection, but given St. Lawrence’s reputed sense of humor, he probably would have appreciated it.

St. Lawrence’s story is printed in your leaflet, and I’ve preached on it enough that you probably don’t need me to tell the story again. Instead today I’d like to focus on the fact that Lawrence was a deacon of the church.

What is a deacon? Deacons are defined on page 856 of our Prayer Book, in the Catechism section, as people whose particular ministry is “to represent Christ and his church, particularly as a servant of those in need; and to assist bishops and priests in the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments.”

Our other source is the Bible itself, in Acts 6, where the origin of the order of deacons is described. The early church recognized that to follow in Jesus’ footsteps, they not only had to preach the Gospel but also feed the poor, as Jesus did. As their numbers increased, it became plain that these functions were better divided between individuals. So instead of having the same disciples preaching and distributing food, the early Christian community called out seven men, to start, who would concentrate on serving the poor. These seven received the laying on of hands and were sent out with this particular mission.

The order of deacons, also known as the diaconate, has been with us ever since. It is an ordained order. Deacons today are entitled to wear the white collar and use the title “The Reverend.” They can preach and assist in celebrating the Eucharist, but they are not permitted to do anything in the service that trained lay people cannot also do.

This has led some people, including the Bishop who ordained me, to discourage the permanent diaconate. This particular bishop felt that since lay people canonically can do everything that deacons do, to set apart deacons would have the effect of devaluing the ministry of the laity.

The Very Rev. Cynthia Byers Walter

Still, the permanent diaconate has experienced something of a resurgence, as the church has realized and affirmed the value of a ministry whose particular focus is to connect the world outside the church walls with the Christians inside.

Deacons serve to bring the concerns of the immediate secular community before the congregation and present to the laity opportunities for them to live out their baptismal covenant. Deacons return to the secular community as representatives of the church, distributing alms perhaps, spearheading service ministries, or just being the face of the church on the street, so to speak.

Follow Jim Kelley, the deacon at St. Luke's on the Island, someday as he walks around the island, or downtown, or East Wheeling, wearing his collar and engaging in conversation the people he meets, whether they are good neighbors or drug dealers. This is literally the church on the street.

I have used the expression "permanent diaconate" a couple of times so far. This is to distinguish people who have been called to be deacons and remain deacons from the so-called "transitional diaconate." Every priest in the Episcopal Church becomes a deacon before becoming a priest. Here is my own diaconal certificate. What it says, after giving the date and the place is that I "having been called and consecrated deacon, shall in the name of Christ serve all people, particularly the poor, the sick and the lonely."

When I was ordained a deacon, I was told that even when I became a priest I would remain a deacon in my calling to serve. To emphasize his point, the Bishop said that he himself remained a deacon in this sense. Six months later, when I was ordained a priest, my daily work became concentrated on preaching and liturgy rather than community service, but I am always to remember my calling to serve all people.

There are some parishes in this diocese with permanent deacons serving the purposes I have described: representing the needs of the community to the congregation and the ministry of the congregation to the community. We here at Lawrencefield, have not, thus far, been so blessed. This however does not absolve us from our calling as baptized Christians to serve the community.

In the absence of a flesh-and-blood ordained deacon in our midst, we do well to turn to St. Lawrence, and allow him to represent to us a community in need: a community where the poor are not only remembered, but treasured by God., a community where the oppressive powers cannot suppress the Spirit of love (and humor, for that matter.)

If you are the kind of person who prays to saints, pray to Lawrence for a measure of his courage, principle and heart for the poor, for us individually and collectively as St. Lawrence's Church. If that's too popish for you, pray to God for a measure of Lawrence's courage, principle and heart for the poor. You may want to pray for Lawrence's humor, too.

OK, I'm done on this side.