

Homily for October 25, 2009

The Holy Spirit works in strange ways and no one tells Her where to blow. Here we are, gathered in an Episcopal church to celebrate the ordination of a Roman Catholic Womanbishop. Not too long ago, some thousand miles away, the Vatican invited Anglicans back into the lap of Holy Mother Church. Unfortunately this was not an invitation to find common ground and a closer ecumenical table community between the two churches, as our Lutheran and Methodist brothers and sisters have done in such a remarkable way. Rather, this was an invitation to those Anglicans who were disgruntled over the decision of the Anglican Church to ordain GLBT persons to the priesthood and women to the Episcopate. Which way is the Spirit blowing?

Both scenarios deal with an invitation and a reaching out from one faithcommunity to a different faith community. There are, however, great differences and one very obvious one to me, is the understanding of the nature of church and the role of priest and bishop.

We in the Roman Catholic Womenpriest movement have deeply wrestled with these ideas and continue to discern what it means to be a priest and a bishop in the 21st century. Even in our small group of less than 100 reform- and like-minded women, we cannot find agreement on these difficult issues. And that is ok. These offices have developed over thousands of years and have been influenced by many religious and political groups and movements. They will change again in the future.

Today I would like to explore, if the readings which we just heard, can assist us in our quest to understand what it means to be church and what to expect from those who minister in this church. There is another question I would like to ask in addition: Would an all male church benefit from the ministry of women? Or let me rephrase this: Would the people of God benefit if an all male hierarchy could acknowledge and sanction the ministry of women that has been offered and has been delivered since the very start of the Jesus movement.

The first reading deals with life and death and with the survival of a people. Shiprah and Puah, two midwives, are the prototype of ministry for me. Helping to bring new life into a world that is often hostile, is what ministry should be about.

Yahweh does not get indignant about Shiprah's and Puah's lies to Pharaoh. He supports their subversive actions and rewards them with abundant life

for their own families. I love the description of those tough Hebrew women who did not wait for the midwives but gave birth when the baby was ready. Isn't that a great image for our women's movement. And be aware, the midwives did what they did to save baby **boys**. What a nice counter image to the one we often experience in our society: women who need to be rescued by males. Another image ministers should take to heart, is that a midwife is not the one who commits the life giving act. She is only an assistant.

The core thought from the second reading, the letter to the Hebrews, is Paul's affirmation that we do not choose to be ministers, we respond to the call. Each of us has to discern continuously, if this call is from the Spirit and the community, or if it comes from our own needs to be recognized or have power. Any faith community that deals primarily with the shortcomings of those whom it serves and covers up the sins and shortcomings of its own ministers, cannot be of the spirit. Only if the high priest acknowledges that he himself is beset with weakness, can he deal patiently with erring sinners. The image of the wounded healer comes to my mind in this context.

The reading from the Gospel of John is one of my favorites. It is read on Holy Thursday which has become a day of celebration of the priesthood in the Catholic Church.

Jesus's gesture is at the same time simple and profound. The act of washing feet was done by slaves. Now the teacher, the leader, is doing this act to those he loves. If we ask today who is most often doing the washing, the answer would be : mothers, grandmas, domestic servants ,women. Water is a female symbol.

Peter, however, as so often, does not get it. It needs to be specifically pointed out to him that allowing Jesus to serve him, will empower him, Peter to serve others. Peter and the subsequent bishops of Rome throughout history, have all too often forgotten that Jesus asked his disciples to refrain from hierarchical power over others. The ministry he asks of his disciples is surely one of service.

There is another image in this gospel that our modern day Peter does not understand. Jesus knows that there is one among his disciples who will betray him. That knowledge does not deter Jesus from not only washing Judas' feet, but to also feed him with his body and blood. How the leaders in the Catholic Church have drawn from this image the right to refuse

communion to politicians who have different views or to women who seek ordination to serve in this church, is beyond my understanding.

What are some of the descriptions of ministry we can draw from the readings?

Ministry should be life giving, assisting, not controlling, it sometimes needs to be subversive. Those who minister need courage to resist power from the outside, But as important is the courage to know that the minister is always in danger of one who overpowers others.

The central acts of ministry are helping to deliver life and spirit in others which means empowering them. The central acts are washing each others' feet and feeding each other, if needed, with our own bodies.

Isn't that the answer to the question I asked before: Would the people of God benefit from the ministry of women? Does the hierarchy not know that most of the worlds midwives are women, and most washing, cleaning and feeding is done by women? Would they not draw the conclusion from that insight that women should be supported and recognized for the services they are already doing. Or is there an element of fear, I detect in my brother bishops that women could push them aside if they would be allowed to unfold fully?

Today I want you, my brother bishops, to let you know: Do not be afraid. We do not seek power.

Give us a chance to add Sara's circle to Jacob's ladder. We are striving to live up to the call of our brother Jesus to be of service. We do not claim to be infallible and we will make mistakes, just like you have made throughout the long history of the church. Let us sing together: All are welcome in this church and then let us go out into the world and live it: together: male and female.

