

June 9, 2018
Feast Day of St. Columba
Ordinations to transitional Diaconate
Luke 10:17-20

The Cathedral of St. Paul
Honolulu, HI

Several years ago, I was in my bed drifting off to sleep when I heard a scratching sound on my pillow. Michael was off-island, so the sound was curious — as I was quite alone. Instinctively, I jumped out of bed and turned on the light. There was a scorpion on my pillow — right next to the place where my head had been.

This would've been a perfect moment to possess the power Jesus describes in Luke's gospel. But no. I grabbed a coaster and pinned down the scorpion until I could figure out how to kill it and without getting stung. Unlike the "seventy two" I do not recall feeling any kind of authority over it at all. I was very scared. My power and dominion over the scorpion came in the form of a bug zapper shaped like a tennis racket.

The promise of being vested with a God-given authority is heady stuff. Jesus obviously knew this and so instructed the "seventy-two" to be careful about reveling in power and authority. "Instead," he says, "rejoice that your names are written in heaven." In other words, your Baptism is sufficient.

In Baptism we step out of an old way of living and enter a new way with the Christian community and its commitment to following Jesus' example.

In Baptism, a story that was once singular and individual, becomes grafted into the story and life of Christ; we no longer live for ourselves alone; instead we live to help create the world God yearns for.

Most Christians participate in the life of Christ without becoming ordained. They employ their unique gifts in the service of Christ and the church as laity — and thank God for them.

You six, however, have been on a separate journey. You have been tested, evaluated, observed, and counseled. You have been measured against a set of expectations — standards developed to ensure you are as prepared as possible to lead the church. Of course, you probably don't feel prepared—at least not fully. Ask any ordained person here; they'll probably tell you that at their ordination to the transitional diaconate they had no idea the hardest part was yet to come. That is as it should be.

To a certain extent you have been "romanced" onto this journey toward priesthood. As Barbara Brown Taylor notes, "romance is how life gets us where life needs us to be. And by extension the romance of ordination is how God tricks us into servanthood." And it is in the days and years after the "romance" — when you are serving, teaching and preaching that you will need to know, from the deepest places, who you are. In other words, you will need to dive deep into your life story and claim it — all of it, especially those times you have been wounded.

To paraphrase Henri Nouwen: those who proclaim liberation and new life in Jesus are called not only to care for our own wounds and the wounds of others, but also to make our wounds into a major source of healing power. Your story, with its successes and failures, its joy and despair, is the truest and most authentic gift you will bring to your vocation. At its core, your story is what you know to be true about yourself: not only what sustains you but also the fears you dare not name. Your story bears the scars of injustices suffered, wounds that run deep, love that transforms, passions that have surprised you, and choices you made for no rational or practical reason.

Today, I see six individuals whose stories are complex — where the light shines and where the shadows haunt. And each of you has, as part of your story, an experience of being at the margins; you know exclusion and the sting of feeling invisible or discounted. Whether from sexism, racism or homophobia; whether from being too liberal amongst a circle of conservatives, whether from being born and raised in Hawai'i yet forever counted as a "haole." You each have an experience at the margins that is an important part of your story.

Kenji Yoshino, a legal scholar in the area of civil rights, once wrote: "We all have a story we must repeat until we get it right, a story whose conveniences must be corrected and whose simplifications must be seen-through before we are done with it, or it with us." None of us can escape the story of who we are, what brought us to this place, why we've done what we've done...or what has broken us. And we all have parts of our stories that we would rather deny — experiences or choices that we regret and would rather forget.

Ordination does not make null and void the parts of your story that you don't like. If anything, ignoring or silencing those parts of your story will make you blind and deaf — they will harden your heart. And you cannot fulfill your ordination vows with a hardened heart.

In the months ahead, your time as a transitional deacon will fly by. Before you know it, you'll be ordained a priest. Take care that you don't regard this diaconal time like the engagement before the marriage.

The ministry of a deacon is at the heart of the great reversals that Jesus taught: that the power of serving those in need is greater than earthly power, and the compassion gained from standing at the margins is greater than standing at the center; that the poor and weak will inherit the kingdom of God — not the rich strongman, and the authority of God's love is greater than authority built on a foundation of fear.

The deacon's ministry is a sign to the world that the first shall be last and the last first — in a world where domination and wealth are rewarded, the deacon's work is a concrete reminder of Jesus' words, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

The deacon's work is at the margins of our communities — to call the church to be Christ's hands in the world and to show the world that injustice (and the suffering it causes) are signs of hardened hearts in a heart-broken world ... and to make it clear that Jesus abhors injustice and suffering. As we just heard from the reading from Isaiah, "The Lord loves those who hate evil."

A deacon's ministry reminds the world that Jesus is alive and present: feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, sheltering the houseless, visiting the prisoner. This is *sacred* work and the church needs it now more than ever. So take the time in these months ahead to lean into the diaconate.

Your ordination calls you to lean into sacramental living ... today and forever after, you enter the public view and what you say and do ought to reflect the face of Christ. And let me be clear: this is not about perfection, or never being wrong, or being the smartest person in the room. It's not about being the bishop's favorite, or leading the biggest congregation, or having the most successful stewardship campaign.

Living sacramentally, as a member of the clergy, means that we strive to be an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. Experience will teach you that this outward sign is often in the form of "I'm sorry," or "I don't know the answer to that," or to simply be present and non-anxious even when you are surrounded by those who are fearful and angry.

Ordination does not inscribe names in heaven; baptism does. In our baptism, we have been given a new story in Christ.

So now, there are two stories you are living: one story shaped by accidents not of your making, and by deeds done and left undone. The other story is one you have chosen... to live in ways that transform the world into God's image, first in your baptism and now in ordination.

Your story is a witness of who you are. To quote Rowan Williams, "What you don't understand or see, the bits of yourself you can't pull together in a convincing story, are all held in a single gaze of love...it is all held together in that unifying gaze...the divine witness." God not only sees each of us, God knows us by name.

Our brokenness, our suffering, our wounds, our fears are already known by God. There is great comfort in knowing this...not only because we are assured of God's love, but because we are released from the drive to compete, to win, to dominate ... we are not called to pretend that we are someone else; we are free to bind up our own wounds in order to bind up the wounds of others.

Jesus assures the 'seventy-two' that nothing about the power of the enemy will hurt them. Our fear of earthly suffering is a constant reminder of our dependence on Jesus Christ. In Christ and through Christ, we are assured that facing into the fullness of our stories will not hurt us ... will not make us unworthy ... will not destroy us.

God knew us before we knew ourselves; God knows the deepest parts of our stories and loves us still.

Haaheo, Mark, Preston, Jasmine, Alison, and Chris: Claim every piece of your story; claim it for your own sake; claim it for the sake of the body of Christ. And once you've claimed it, build your story on the ONE foundation: Jesus Christ.

Sisters and brothers, let us live sacramentally — by claiming our stories to reveal the spiritual grace of God at all times and in all places.