



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE REVEREND STEVEN CRIPPEN, RECTOR, ST. PAUL'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
ORDINATIONS TO THE SACRED ORDER OF DEACONS, DECEMBER 9, 2023
1 JOHN 4:7-14; PSALM 148:8-15; MARK 10:13-16

SERMON FOR DIACONAL ORDINATIONS ON THE FEAST OF ST. NICHOLAS

Mark 10:13-16 [People were bringing little children to Jesus in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.]

I love wizards. The wizard *archetype*, that is: the elderly artisan at the edge of the village, the wise one, the skillful — and usually a bit odd — person who possesses great intelligence, but is also cleverly *gentle*, strategically kind, consciously tender. Think of the sages from the east, searching Judea for a small child because they looked up at the night sky and understood what they saw. Think of a grandparent who smiles warmly — and knowingly — allowing the smile to travel

all the way up to their twinkling eyes. Think of an old woman with her long white hair braided in back, her ancient face alight with youthful wonder; or think of an old man with his long beard sewn with one or two dazzling gems: is he weird? No ... Well, a little bit. But he's also ingenious.

The wizard is wise and gentle, then, but they are also *powerful*: our fantasy stories vest wizards with magical abilities, and the

wizard is so skillful at the magical arts that they have no need for simple charms or pedestrian wands: they can simply raise one hand and silently summon mighty forces to our aid.

The wizard is powerful, then, but she is also powerfully *merciful*: we hear of lion-hearted wizards whose dreadful, yet pastoral job is to carefully pick over the battlefield after all the violence has ended, and dispatch dying soldiers in a *coup de grâce*, a final blow that eases their passing. A strong wizard is equal to this daunting and solemn task.

And finally, the wizard is *fierce*: when they are riled up, fired up, seized with righteousness, they rise to a great height. Even the weather cooperates with a ferocious wizard: darkness falls around them while they thunder with terrible tidings of swift justice for the enemy, or a swift rebuke of the wretched wrongdoer who has crossed their path. (“Even the wind and the seas obey him,” we recall, in an astonishing story about our Wizard of wizards.)

Gentle but powerful, merciful but fierce: this is the *wizard* in the cultural imagination of many lands. And this is Nicholas, called a wonderworker in our tradition, an easier word than “wizard” for our liturgical calendars and

hagiographies. Nicholas is particularly beloved in the east, but he is cherished worldwide.

Sadly, all too often, our veneration of wizards – including Nicholas – does not do justice to their majestic nature. We see them as gentle, which is true enough, but we often underestimate their power. We adore Nicholas in particular for his high regard for people experiencing extreme poverty, but we tend to paper over his ferocity about the social forces that damage and oppress the poor. Nicholas did not gently place gold coins in rows of children’s shoes; he *threw gold through the window*. He was a fearsome friend of God who fed the rich with justice. Did he lose his temper and get in a fist fight at the Council of Nicaea? Our tradition stops short of confirming this story, but part of me hopes it is true. I have attended church conventions. I have felt fierce feelings.

In any case, Nicholas is not just a sweet sugarplum saint for kids on a magical December night; he is hard enough to be the patron of seafarers; and he is smart enough to know, like Jesus himself, how powerful and fierce children themselves usually are. “Let the little children come to me,” teaches the Wizard of Nazareth, “and do not stop them.” Why would he need to teach us this if children were harmless, easy, frivolous beings? A wizard wisely

appreciates the immense power and wisdom of a child.

And so we remember Nicholas as more than a jolly elf. We remember him properly as an unnerving and intimidating wizard-saint, a faith leader who is driven into the world on God's errand. Nicholas was and is a warrior, a zealot, a prophet — Nicholas is a deacon and a priest and a bishop.

Today we will ask God to fill with grace and power – not just grace, but *power*, too – the souls and bodies of Phillip, Theresa, Lisa, Martin, Myra, and Robert. Grace *and* power. Today, a few months before the Church affirms God's priestly call of these wonderworkers, today we will affirm that God is forming them first to be *deacons*. Could *deacon* be another word for wizard?

Deacons certainly are powerful. Deacons descend from the long tradition of fiery prophets in God's Church. We remember generations of prophets, priests, judges, and kings in the First Testament, and we recall many stories of prophets in particular rising up in power, sometimes dreadful power, to goad and lead God's people.

But deacons are not just fiery prophets. They are also iconic servants, and if the word *servant* makes you think of a quiet

waiter at an elegant restaurant, you're not completely off the mark, but think again. Jesus himself is perhaps no more powerful than in that diaconal moment when he scandalizes his friends by washing their feet, and asks them that penetrating question: "*Do you know what I have done to you?*" A good servant is a powerful agent of action and leadership in any household, including a household of faith. And deacons are, again, *iconic* servants: they *shine* in their service; they glow with the servant heart of Jesus. They inspire others to point to them and say, "Oh, I want that. I want to do that, too."

And finally, deacons are charismatic Gospellers. They proclaim the Good News. The best wizards know that prophets who only shout in anger will be dismissed as tedious gadflies. They understand their call to fill God's people with hope. And so, before long, all six of you will carry our Holy Book into the midst of the assembly and proclaim what you read there: you will be Gospellers. And when a deacon proclaims the Gospel, her diaconal vocation silently underscores how the Good News is itself prophetic, and how the Good News calls all of us listeners into lives of powerful service.

Gentle but powerful, merciful but fierce: this is the wizard; this is the deacon. When I first discerned whether I might be called

to set aside some of the freedoms of the mighty order of lay ministry to serve under the orders of a bishop, I believed I was called to the so-called “permanent” diaconate. But “permanent” is a problematic word: it evokes the same meaning as a quote “terminal” degree: I would be ordained a deacon and stop there, with a thud. But this dishonors the sacred order of deacons, which enjoys full equality alongside the other three orders of ministry. The diaconate is not a six-month pit stop for some and an underwhelming destination for others. Have you met a deacon? Even the wind and the seas obey them! And while we’re on the topic, “transitional” is also a problematic word: the diaconate is not merely a way station on the road to a Real Thing.

No, anyone and everyone who is ordained to the diaconate is a *vocational* deacon; a deacon forever, yes, but more importantly a person who includes “deacon” as part of what Frederick Buechner famously defines as their *vocation*: “that place where a person’s deep gladness meets the world’s deep need.” You six are priests, but your vocation is also diaconal. All priests are vocational deacons; all bishops are vocational priests; and all clergy are ordinary Christians focusing on particular dimensions of the larger baptismal

identity that *all* Christians share. In short, it goes like this: in Holy Baptism, we are *all* wizards.

God forms us all to be gentle, but also powerful; to be merciful, but also fierce. In a few moments, our friends will submit to the laying on of hands by a wizard, a wonderworker, who again will ask God to fill these prophets, these servants, these Gospellers with God’s grace, and with God’s power. I pray that God will fill them with gentleness, too, but also *ferocity*. Rise up, chosen deacons in the Church of God. Carry your diaconate into your priesthood, which even now is edging over your eastern horizon. Take up your calling. Rise up in *power*. Throw gold through windows. Go and be prophets, servants, and Gospellers of the One who leavens all creation with fierce wisdom, and gathers all people in powerful, wondrous mercy.