

How many of you have heard of The Philadelphia Eleven? The Philadelphia Eleven are the first women priests in the Episcopal Church. Tomorrow marks the 50th anniversary of their ordination.

Until that day half a century ago, although there was no Church law prohibiting it, women had only been ordained as deacons, despite that being a completely separate call and distinct order of ministry.

It's a common misconception that deacons are studying to be priests, or we washed out of seminary and now have to "settle" for wearing a crooked stole. But in fact, vocational deacons discern a specific call to the diaconate and plan to serve that order for life.

That was not the case with the Philadelphia Eleven. These women had clearly discerned a call to the priesthood. All graduated from seminary. They were just as qualified as any man to perform the duties of a priest. And yet, the institution had thus far not allowed that, so they served as deacons.

On July 29, 1974, these 11 women stood at the altar of the Church of the Advocate in Philadelphia, as a bishop laid hands on them and administered their vows for the priesthood—a service the broader Church deemed an "irregular" ordination.

Widely considered an act of civil disobedience, the event caused quite an uproar. The women suffered harassment, threats, and were banned from church property. They didn't know for certain their ordination would ever be considered "valid." Yet they kneeled at that altar, confident in their conviction

that God was calling them to this ministry. And they opened the door for the official acceptance of women into the priesthood two years later, in 1976.

It is no coincidence that this anniversary falls on the Feast of Mary and Martha of Bethany and one week after the Feast of Mary Magdalene, celebrated this past Monday. The Philadelphia Eleven, all still alive today, walked in the footsteps of the first women disciples—also excluded, their gifts overlooked. How fitting, too, that Sunday, standing alongside Mother Marcia and myself, Canon Joanna opened our worship with “Welcome to the Chick Service.”

Afterward, someone commented that she wished we were in a place where having all women lead the service was as natural as having all men—something we wouldn’t feel compelled to call attention to. While I understand the sentiment, my response is, we are not there yet. We are far from there.

In a democracy that proclaims equal rights for all, many faith communities across our nation refuse to ordain women—or even allow them to serve in leadership positions. Others openly teach that women should assume a submissive role to men. If I walked in the door of these churches wearing my collar, I would not be welcome.

The sad reality is this particular celebration of 50 years of social progress coincides with our present time of increasing threats to women’s autonomy, persecution of trans youth and their families, discrimination against the LGBTQ+ community, and the ongoing oppression of other communities on the margins.

To wish we could be blind to gender is akin to wishing we could all be color blind. However well-intentioned, when we claim we're "blind to gender or color," that we see everyone the same, the implication is that racism and sexism are unfortunate individual acts. This leaves us without a framework to examine our own biases or a means of accountability. As Christians, such blindness also leaves us without a clear path to seek justice for all God's beloved children and respect the dignity of every human being, the core of our baptismal covenant.

We can and should celebrate the progress we've made on the shoulders of those who came before us, even as we recognize how far we still are from where God is calling us to be.

Until the time that all God's children feel safe in their gender identity, sexual orientation and personal choices, we are not there. Until the time Black parents don't have to teach their children about the dangers of an encounter with law enforcement, we are not there. Until all families have access to good education and secure housing, we are not there. We are far from there.

Our news feeds may be full of politics at present, but buried in there is also the story of Sonya Massey, a 36-year-old Black woman who called police to her home in Illinois earlier this month, over concerns about a potential intruder.

The responding deputy reported feeling threatened by Sonya picking up a pot of boiling water from the stove, and he fired three shots, killing her. Sonya joins a long line of Black women and men who died senselessly, needlessly. The officer has been charged with murder. We can acknowledge this as progress, even as we mourn the ongoing violence against people of color. We are not there.

The state of our world can certainly be a heavy burden for well-intentioned people to bear. It can leave us feeling helpless and hopeless. And for Christians, it can raise the question: How can I know my gifts will even make a difference?

The Gospel is always a good starting place to explore such questions. This morning, John brings us one of Jesus's most famous miracles: the feeding of the 5,000. It's an event more than tenfold the scope of the similar one from today's Old Testament reading, where Elisha sets a modest offering before 100 people, who all eat and have some left. Some 900 years later, Jesus walks in the footsteps of the prophet of his ancestors—and does something even more amazing.

Jesus and the disciples have gathered in Galilee, a large crowd on their heels. And Jesus says to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" Andrew responds, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" And Jesus tells him to have the people sit. Then he takes the loaves, gives thanks, and passes bread and fish to everyone present—as much as they want, until their stomachs are full. Afterward he tells the disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." And they fill 12 baskets with leftovers.

Now, even beyond the mechanics of the miracle, there are many questions we might ask about this passage. Here's one: Why did Jesus insist on collecting the leftovers?

Was he simply an early harbinger against food waste? Was he taking the fragments on his continuing journey to feed other communities? Did he plan to have the disciples pass out to-go bags as the crowd dispersed?

All possibilities, but perhaps Jesus's focus at this moment is less on the needs of the crowd—and more on the needs of his disciples, who must soon carry out his ministry in the world without him. What if Jesus wanted to arm each of the 12 disciples with a basket, empowering them each to go forth and share these gifts? Could Jesus have been extending a symbolic gesture of encouragement?

As violence tears at the fabric of our society and divisiveness threatens our sense of peace, amid misogynist and racist rhetoric and hateful discourse, it is easy to feel discouraged and overwhelmed. Jesus says to us, the needs may be massive, but no one's gifts are too small—not even the modest gifts of a little boy. God's love is ever abundant. God multiplies whatever we offer and does miraculous things.

As followers of Jesus, our challenge is to hold fast amid the storm, to look to our Messiah walking toward us, saying "It is I, do not be afraid."

And in the darkness, we are blessed to have a guiding beacon. However people may try to twist Scripture to suit their agendas, there is perfect clarity in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ: a Savior who denounced violence, challenged unjust systems, fed the hungry, healed the sick, broke bread with outcasts, lifted up the lowly, rejected "kinghood," called out abuses of power—a Savior who lived out compassion and love in everything he did.

What Jesus modeled for the early disciples he teaches us in the here and now. We are not helpless bystanders in the crowd; we are disciples of Christ Almighty, empowered to go out to spaces that desperately need God's healing love and boldly share our gifts, no matter how meager we might believe them to be.

And so, on this special anniversary in the life of the Church, let us celebrate moments of progress even as we see the miles of rough seas ahead. Let us always turn to Jesus, Prince of Peace, the Way of Love.

I'll close with these words from our Epistle, "Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen."