

The Leadership of the Least

June 29, 2019 • Saints Peter and Paul • Ordination of Stéphanie Burette, Deacon

Text: Luke 22:24: "A dispute arose among them as to which one of them was the greatest."

You cannot possibly know how glad I am to be here and to see all of you here. And you probably cannot know *why* I am so glad to see you all here. It is because after three months' worth of long threads of e-mails involving the Dean and the new bishop, we finally, *finally* got Stéphanie to commit to a day and a time to show up here and get ordained.

There was her graduation from Yale in late May, and then her pre-ordination retreat. We thought about the first of June, but then her visa expired, and if she left the U.S. she wouldn't be able to go back in for her missionary training on June 16... and *that* lasted until, well, just two days ago. So if the ordinand before us looks a little jet-lagged, she has very good reason to be.

But now she is here, and even better with an expired visa she can't go back, so we finally have our moment, and our congregation, and our choir, and everything else, including, thanks be to God, Stéphanie. And that is why I am glad to see you all here.

We have been at this a long time. Stéphanie first appears in the files of the Convocation some years ago. She has wandered a long road since then, meeting with committees and commissions, being examined by doctors, spending three years at Yale taking exams and writing papers, taking the General Ordination Examination. We tried everything we could think of, every obstacle we could come up with, to make her think twice about this. But here we are, in this churchiest of churchy moments, the culmination of all those processes and programs and requirements and rules.

And do you know what? The best news of all today is that the church does all that work, creates all those hurdles and hoops for Stéphanie to jump over and through, and then doesn't get to have the last word. Because today what happens after all of that is that the church gets out of God's way, and lets the Holy Spirit do her irrepressible, insistent work.

In some ways, all these years we have been chaperoning a courtship. Just when we think we know God, just when we think we know how God works—or just when we think we know God isn't there at all—God called the heart of this woman. And Stéphanie—perhaps at first quite to her own surprise—began calling back. The draw of the Holy Spirit between these two became so dangerous that of course we in the church had to place ourselves in the middle between them to manage their relationship.

But today the church gets out of the way. Today we let them be on their own.

The people around Jesus were a lot like the people around us. They were social stratifiers. They lived in a culture with rigid social hierarchies and lots of ways to signal where you fit in that structure. Your religious status. Your financial status. Your social status. The social status of the people you were closest to.

It isn't surprising that we are still social stratifiers. One of the reasons we have prospered as a species is exactly that we have adapted into highly social creatures; we are acutely aware of the smallest gradations in social status, and capability, and power.

Every day when I commute to work, I leave the Metro at the George V station and the first thing I walk by is the Louis Vuitton store. There is always a line of people, stretching down the block, waiting in all kinds of weather just for a chance to be let in to look at the merchandise. Farther down the avenue, when you pass the hotels it is always the most expensive cars parked right at the curbside. We want to signal our power, our success, our status.

Stéphanie, there is no line of people waiting to get into the cathedral. The people out there are still arguing among themselves just like those early disciples did about which one of them is the greatest. Not very many of them see an answer to that need in the Christian faith.

And there is a very good reason for that. Very little about what we do here gives any affirmation to that world of social climbing and ambitious posing.

What we preach here, what we have been taught by the one we proclaim to be Lord and Savior, is that that whole idea is upside-down.

First, Jesus says, when God looks at us God sees *no* rank ordering, no best-to-worst, no honor rolls and detention lists: We are all radically equal in the sight of God. That is an idea completely at odds with the way humans are designed to work. And that is why it is so radical.

And along with that comes the ethic that Jesus teaches to turn this world in to *that* vision: We disciples have to create among ourselves a right-side-up world. In the world we are called to create, the highest are the lowest, the least are the greatest, the youngest are the wisest, and the outcasts are the in-crowd.

That is the world we are called to build, at least within the church. And by God's grace, when we get it right in the church, which we don't do often enough, we begin to change the world *outside* the church, too.

It turns out there is a hidden gift in the long wait we had to endure to figure out a day for this to happen. Most people are ordained to the diaconate right after they graduate, in late May or maybe early June. These days some people are even ordained *before* they graduate, much to the consternation of us older people.

But it just so happens that by waiting this long we gave you a peculiar gift. You are ordained on the Feast of Saint Peter and Saint Paul. They, too, argued between themselves over who was the greatest. They had different visions for the church, each one of which, in isolation, would not have brought about the vision of the beloved community Jesus dreamed of for his people.

One thought the gift of the Way of Love was only to be shared by the people already chosen by God, people who understood that relationship with God is a covenant, not a

casual thing. And one thought the gift had the purpose of expanding the idea of “chosenness” to be radically expanded to all encompass all people, everywhere, for all time.

In the reading you chose for us to hear from the Acts of the Apostles this morning, we see what happened when one of those brothers in Christ allowed himself to imagine the truth of the other’s ideas. Peter’s dream teaches him that God’s love is neither defined nor limited by our imaginations; instead, it is our imaginations that are meant to be made wider by the transforming power of God’s love.

Holy mother church, in her wisdom, decided which of them was the greatest. She decided that they were equal, and so we celebrate them together. The upside-down world of the beloved community even applies to our calendar.

So never forget that you were ordained on this day that lives right in the tension between the church as it has been and the church as it will be. Never forget that you were ordained on this day that rejects the notion that of rank ordering even saints. That is not how the God of love, the God who charts the way of love even through the wilderness of despair, that is not how our God works.

Stéphanie, you are now called to be among us as a deacon in the church. There is a reason why all of us who take up the ordained part of the ministry of the church start in that role. It is because in this time you are called by God to stand in the space between the world God calls us to create here and the world as it is—the world where we fight over power, and land, and privilege, and access.

You are called to be among us to speak the needs of the world, to help us understand how we can better address the needs of that world that Christ came to save.

And at the same time you are called to be in that world on our behalf, preaching the Gospel’s possibility of a different vision, a higher hope, a holy purpose.

So value this time, and give yourself to it fully, prayerfully, and fearlessly. Because for this moment you are by no means the least in the ministry of the church; Jesus has taught us that the leaders are the ones who serve. Be our leader, Stéphanie; lead us into the world God calls us to serve, and to the extent that God enables you, lead the world to the knowledge of God’s love. *Amen.*