

Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost, Year C
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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In 1976, before many of our newer members were born, the General Convention of the Episcopal Church — its national governing body made up of bishops, priests, deacons, and lay people elected from each diocese — approved the ordination of women to the priesthood. That isn't all that terribly long ago.

The bishops and the deputies to Convention had wrestled with the question of female priests for about a decade before the actual decision came down, and as you might imagine, passions were quite high.

In 1974 — two years before the national church's historic vote — eleven women who had been ordained deacons but had been denied ordination to the priesthood decided that they were called to serve as priests immediately rather than waiting until the legislative body of the Episcopal Church made its decision. On the Feast of Sts. Mary and Martha, at the Church of the Advocate in Philadelphia, the eleven women were made priests by three bishops who were acting intentionally against the will of the General Convention.

During the ordination of a priest — much like at a wedding — there is a place for the public to comment on whether the rite about to take place is lawful. When the bishops asked whether anyone present knew of any impediment why these women should not be ordained, several priests stood up and condemned the ordination by reading prepared statements. After the statements were read, the ordaining bishops replied to the protesters that the ordinations were going to proceed as an act of obedience to God.

The Philadelphia 11, as those brave women came to be known, are a part of our shared history. These women offered themselves for service in a church and at a time that was not entirely receptive to their gifts. Their act of defiance brought some peripheral and polite disagreements into the roaring center of the church. Those of you who were there might very well remember it as a time of unrest.

I wasn't there, but I would like to think that I would have been one of those radical priests who was firmly on the side of women's ordination, in defiance of my wardens, my church, and my bishop. But I can't know that. Perhaps I would have been one of those priests who was reading chapter and verse of the law in protest at the ordinations. It's easy to play the hero in one's mind and in retrospect. Ask anyone opining on a Packers game on a Monday morning.

One of the great gifts and one of the intractable problems of belonging to an ancient religion is that we are not nimble. We change slowly and tend to preference tradition. You might say that our instincts are conservative.

Because of that, I have a lot of sympathy for the Sadducee in today's Gospel reading. He is giving a faithful reading of the law as he understands it, and he is treating Jesus as he would any rabbi who was in town — debating the fine parts of the law to hopefully achieve greater clarity into the will of God. Sometimes the Sadducee is painted as a bad man who is blinded by the law and can't see the ways that Jesus fulfills and transforms the law. But I wonder what it would be like to imagine him as trying to be faithful to tradition as he sees it.

The grace I see in the story is the way that Jesus engages with the Sadducee's question. He takes it seriously and then offers a radical read. What would it look like if we were to follow Jesus this way — to take opponents seriously and to assume their questions are good faith. And then to offer a radical answer that always points to life, to resurrection, and to God.

To belong to an organization — and I don't care if that's a school district, a fortune 500 company or a church — is to feel the struggle between tradition and innovation. And what I read in this story is Jesus' willingness to redeem all of us. Those of us who can get too mired in the tradition — Jesus is preaching the resurrection to us. Those of us who can innovate too quickly and leave behind our beloved siblings — Jesus is preaching the resurrection to us as well.

I suppose the Christian hope is that God will always remind us of the important things — the bread, the wine, the water, and the Word. I don't mean to say that the things we fight about in church aren't worth anything. Of course, they are. I am forever indebted to those 11 faithful women who helped to shape the church that I know, love, and serve today.

But I think the role of a Christian ultimately is to point to the greater realities behind our arguments. The people next to you in that pew, with whom you very well may disagree about all sorts of things, are in fact your siblings in Christ through the very grace of God. Or, put another way, that person — actor, singer, politician, pundit, or neighbor — who is doing something you think is downright nasty is, in fact, made of the same holy stardust that you are, and is beloved of God in the same way that you are. That's quite a difficult pill to swallow sometimes, but it's the absolute and holy truth. We are the followers of Christ, but we also resemble the Sadducee. We are the brave women being ordained in 1976, and we are also the protesting priests. Don't be too hard on the Sadducee in the story. He's you, and he's me. Just remember that Jesus took him seriously and then pointed him toward the greater reality of God's presence and power.

If our biblical history and our church history teach us anything, I believe it's not to be too convinced of our own rightness or our own ability to make perfect decisions. We will fall short of God's plan of salvation for the world, and Jesus invites us to abundant life anyway. Amen.