**“Called by Imperfection”**

A sermon by The Rev. Christopher Wendell

On the occasion of The Rev. Rachel Wildman’s first Mass as a Deacon

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St. Paul’s Episcopal Church

Bedford, MA

Yesterday was a special day in the life of the church. In New York City at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, our own Rachel Wildman was ordained as a transitional deacon. The service was transcendent. The Cathedral itself, one of the largest in the world, is utterly magnificent…with a grand nave, and large choir, several side chapels and beautiful sculpture, marble work, and stained glass wherever you look. The wax altar candles were taller than I am. The pageantry of the processions and vestments was full of color, texture, and yes, even smell. The incense was in full swing – literally. The emotion of the service was palpable, culminating in the ancient chant invoking the Holy Spirit as Rachel and her five peers knelt before the altar for the laying on of hands. Something was clearly happening, and all of us, even the bishop, were merely witnessing to how God has called her into this particular vocation.

As the two hour liturgy unfolded, I found myself turning some words over and over again in my heart. They were the words of the collect, spoken at the very start of the service:

“Let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up; things which have grown old are being made new; and that all things are being brought to their perfection.”

These words are actually part of every ordination service, for deacons, priests and bishops. It is tempting to hear them as an affirmation that now the newly ordained person has been called to this vocation because of her perfection. But thankfully, that’s wrong. They are in fact meant to celebrate how, again and again, God can take whatever is imperfect, impaired, seemingly beyond use, and turn it in to a force for new life, new hope, and new healing. This is true not just for deacons, priests, and bishops, but for all people. When we pray these words, we are reminded of the unending cycle of renewal that pervades all creation; the promise that nothing, and no one, is ever irreparably lost. No matter what is in our past, we are assured that God is in our present, leading us into a future in which all things, and all people, are being brought to their perfection. I think we can all take comfort in this promise, especially in this season of Lent, when we are perhaps a little more aware of our own imperfections, rough edges, and areas in need of some refinement.

But how will this process of “all things being brought to their perfection” unfold? How will it unfold for Rachel? How will it unfold for you? How will it unfold for the church? How will it unfold for the world?

It can only begin in one place: our imperfection. We are human, and so we are, by definition, imperfect creatures living in imperfect communities praying in an imperfect church on behalf of an imperfect world. But our shared imperfection is no cause for shame. Rather, it is something to be listened to. Because it is when we are struck, arrested even, by some occasion of humanity’s imperfection that we find a sense of calling to some kind of action . And it is where the imperfection feels most painful that we find God inviting us into our particular vocation.

Perhaps we are moved by the reality of how frail our human bodies and minds are. How easily they are wounded, and how delicate to repair. And we are called into vocations as healers of the body or mind. Perhaps we are moved by the reality of how inequitable the distribution of societies’ resources are; and we are called into vocations of social work and education and politics and advocacy and public charity. Perhaps we are moved by the reality of that human beings need protection, and we are called into vocations as police officers and firefighters and soldiers. However each of us encounters the imperfections of humanity, that personal experience invites us into our unique vocation to participate in God’s work of bringing all things to their perfection.

Those of us who end up in the ordained ministry usually have been moved in some way by the imperfections and inadequacies of how human beings have understood God. Our call to be preachers and pastors and deacons and priests and bishops is very often rooted in our experiences of being unable to tolerate the sufferings imposed by some upon others in the name of the God. The perfection we long to see is a world in which all who call upon the name of God, in whatever language and culture and context, accept themselves and all people as creatures of dignity and holiness, with the possibility of being brought by God to their own special perfection in time. We try to model this in ourselves, and encourage it in others. And, as in any vocation, most days it brings us deep joy.

But like a surgeon who sees a patient she can’t heal or a teacher who watches one of his students spiral into failure – sometimes we also must face feelings of discouragement in our vocations. We all reach an awareness of where our efforts fail to remedy the imperfection of the world, and it leaves us angry and sad.

I’m sure Jesus felt that way in today’s Gospel, when he arrived at the Temple in Jerusalem and saw how the faithful Jews who had come to the temple to offer their animal sacrifices were being exploited. The local merchants, moneychangers, and temple police had colluded to extort money from those simply seeking to worship God. As had happened in his encounters with Pharisees refusing to welcome people they considered impure, with unjust judges refusing to help widows, and even with his own disciples refusing to let children follow him – Jesus is deeply moved when he sees the suffering caused by our human brokenness. And he gets angry. So much so that he throws over the moneychangers tables, drives out the animal vendors, and causes enough chaos to arouse the suspicion of the police. In his frustration he “cleanses” the temple.

Whenever I hear this story, my first thought is always, “Good for you, Jesus. Way to listen to your anger and act on it.” It feels good to see Jesus willing to use a little force to end injustice. But, then I think to myself, “Ok, you cleansed the temple, but really, how long is that going to last? Won’t they all just be back tomorrow?” And then I remember that the point of this moment in Jesus’ life isn’t that he solved this problem. The point is that, even when it was riskiest to himself, even right in front of those with the power to arrest and execute him, he had the ability and the will to pay attention to the imperfection of the world, and live out his vocation in response to it.

Rachel, all of us here today know that you share in Jesus’ vocation to help all people who speak in God’s name speak with more love and act with greater justice. After yesterday, the whole church has affirmed this vocation in you. We are grateful that you have chosen to live this vocation among us, and pray that God will help you to help us also speak with more love and act with more justice. As a wise monk once said, “Love must act, as light must shine and fire must burn.”

To help you help us in this, our parish has a gift for you. It is not, thankfully, a whip of chords. Rather, it is a different tool that will hopefully have a more lasting effect in bringing us all a little closer to our perfection. Jesus hadn’t instituted the Eucharist yet when he cleansed the temple. That came a few days later. Maybe once he realized that force wasn’t going to effect positive change in the long run, he decided to try ritual instead. The gift is a home communion kit, engraved with your initials, so that during your deaconate, and for years beyond, you may nourish us, the body of Christ, in our own particular vocations, whatever they may be.

“Let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up; things which have grown old are being made new; and that all things are being brought to their perfection.” AMEN.