

**DEACON STORY:**

A true story about a newly ordained Deacon serving in a new place: An Episcopal church in this area was celebrating a big event, to which this Deacon was excited to serve in her first service. Right before the day was to come, however, a tornado wiped out power in the area and made the church incapable of holding the service. Another church quickly agreed to step in serve as host and all the materials were transferred there—the vestments, the parish banner, the cross, the elements and the linens. The altar guilds did a marvelous job of working together to make sure everything went forward without a hitch: nothing was broken or mishandled in the move and all was set to go that Sunday morning.

All was well as the Service proceeded up until that moment in which the Deacon was preparing the Table. At that time, the new deacon picked up the container, holding the wine, and realized that it was empty. No one had checked it until she was about to pour it for communion. Standing behind the altar, between the Rector and the Bishop, who was also on hand at that moment, the deacon did not know what to do. Unhelpfully the Bishop (Lee), noticing her distress, but not realizing the situation, whispered “Go ahead and pour the wine.” To which the deacon whispered back: “If I can make wine come out of this empty vessel, we have other issues on our hands.”

**PERSONAL:**

I am so excited to be starting here at Good Shepherd, so excited to have gotten the chance to get to know some of you over the last week or so, and so eager to get the opportunity for myself and my family to get to know more of you in the future.

Good Shepherd appears, to me, to be a warm and welcoming place, the type of church where one could experience a mix-up, as that poor deacon did, and all would be forgiven. More importantly, it seems like the type of place where the Holy Spirit runs strong through its congregation, and where a community comes together to know Christ, and to make Christ known.

On behalf of Michelle, Mark, and myself: “thank you” for *already* making this such a soft landing space for the three of us.

“Thank you” for the prayers and support for my ordination yesterday,

“thank you” to those who have stopped by my office to say “hello.”

“Thank you” to those who have seen myself and my family out for walks on the church campus and said “Hello” and then immediately apologized for having said “hello” out of respect for our privacy.

Our Gospel reading today concerns identity and vocation and call. It concerns family, relationships, parents and their children, insiders and outsiders. It pairs well with all that is going on at Good Shepherd today.

### **BIOGRAPHY:**

Sociologists say that people named “Dennis” or “Denise” are more likely to be dentists; people named “Laurence” more likely to be lawyers. People whose names are “Louis” or “George” are more likely to move to St. Louis and Georgia.<sup>1</sup> For what it’s worth, I share a first and middle name, “Charles Robison”, with my grandfather, who indeed was an Episcopal priest, ordained 80 years ago, 1938. I never really knew him, he died when I was young and I only have the faintest of memories of him. Yet here I am.

My grandfather’s influence was profound though and I remember ever so vaguely expressing some interest in the ministry at a young age.

But, like many young people, I also dreamt of being a professional baseball player and when asked then how I would do both careers, I replied: “I will be a baseball player during the week, obviously, and then preach in the Church on Sundays.”

Prior to entering seminary, I did *not* play Major League baseball, rather I taught high school history in schools in Virginia and Louisiana. One year, on Parents’ Night—that anxious evening where the Parents come in and go through an abbreviated version of their child’s schedule, I wrote a quote on the black board: The quote read: “Parents are the bones upon which children sharpen their teeth.” “Parents are the bones upon which children sharpen their teeth.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Brooks, David. 2012. *The Social Animal: The Hidden Sources of Love*. New York: Random House. 208.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Ustinov

## STRANGERS-CHILDREN

A similar tension and friction are present in the heart-breaking scene that we hear in today's Gospel. Along with others of Jesus' family, Mary has come to investigate and bring Jesus home. Instead, Jesus offers those (seeming) cutting words: "Who are my mother and my brothers?" What a tantalizing message for Youth Sunday, what interesting words for us to hear as we celebrate our Picnic today as a Parish Family. "Who are my mother and my brothers?"

I have a couple of decades experience working with young people, inside and outside the church, and then a little over six months of experience with my own son. So I have maybe/ at least a tentative grasp on the notion that: "parents never quite get the children that they were expecting."<sup>3</sup> That ultimately "Children are the greatest strangers that we know. We know that we don't know who they are, yet we love them anyway, *this* is the greatest form of love."

A lot of scholarly energy surrounds this passage and Mary's understanding of who her son was. To paraphrase from the Watergate investigation:

"What did she know? And when did she know it?"

Was it at the Annunciation, the Presentation at the Temple, Jesus' first miracle at the Wedding at Cana, at the Cross itself?

When did Mary recognize Jesus as a stranger?

We will have to let the scholars decide that. But, certainly, Mary knew better than anyone that we don't choose our children, likewise children don't choose their parents. Children then are a gift, not an achievement, nothing short of God's grace. I think one could say the same thing about a close friendship, the one you marry, any sort of intimate connection. You don't choose those things, really. Jesus reminds us of that dynamic in the Gospel of John:

"You did not choose me" Jesus points out "I chose you."<sup>4</sup>

In my experience, that choosing, that relationship with Jesus, has been a journey characterized by a remarkable companionship, dependability, and trust—through times both of great joy and those of great heartbreak.

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<sup>3</sup> William Willimon "On Being Stuck with your parents." November 6, 1988 (Duke University)

<sup>4</sup> John 15.16.

## **VISION:**

What is our job then? What role does the church play in that relationship?

A final quote:

“The most creative social strategy we have to offer is the *church*. Here we show a manner of life the world can never achieve through social coercion or governmental action. We serve the world by showing what it is not, namely, a place where God is forming a family out of strangers.”<sup>5</sup>

I think that is what Jesus was trying to tell Mary in our reading: *I am forming a family out of strangers, including my own.*

The role that the Church plays in people’s lives, particularly in young people’s lives, is, then, to make apparent that process, to articulate a whole world of connections that do not seem to be there. It is not to break up families, of course, but to show God’s vision for life here on earth, and how it breaks through in countless moments, big and small.

Sunday school, Youth group, retreat experiences, service trips show that “reality”. One’s family life, of course, also does that; one’s sports team and one’s extracurriculars might also. But it’s our unique responsibility, as the Church, to do that, to unveil that dream of God, to say “here’s what we think is precious.”

I look forward to that adventure here at Good Shepherd, in asking and pondering that question: “Who are my mother and my sisters?”

I look forward to hearing your stories about God’s call in your lives.

I look forward to pursuing that marvelous version of God’s dream on earth.

I look forward to joining together with strangers, who are nonetheless family, in making God’s world apparent.

**AMEN**

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<sup>5</sup> Hauerwas, Stanley, and William H. Willimon. 1989. *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*. Nashville: Abingdon. 83