

Bishop' Message: E-Chronicle, August 2014

July 29, 2014

Aloha ke Akua,

In his book entitled *The Sacred Journey*, Frederick Buechner suggests that "...all theology, like all fiction, is at its heart autobiography, and that what a theologian is doing essentially is examining as honestly as he can the rough-and-tumble of his own experience with all its ups and downs, its mysteries and loose ends, and expressing in logical, abstract terms the truths about human life and about God that he believes he has found implicit there."

That quote was brought to mind today as the Episcopal Church marks the 40th anniversary of the "irregular" ordination of eleven women to the priesthood on July 29, 1974, in the Church of the Advocate, Philadelphia. The ordinations were said to be "valid" but "irregular" meaning that the sacramental action by the ordaining bishops was appropriate to the episcopal office, but that the bishops involved did not have the required authority to so act. The Episcopal Church's General Convention had not yet approved the ordination of women to the priesthood.

Jumping ahead just a couple of years to the winter of 1977, I was a student on the campus of DePauw University in Greencastle, Indiana. Coming from an unchurched family, I began to ask questions about God, evil and the meaning of life. I wandered into St. Andrew's Episcopal Church just off campus. Within a few months, I was baptized and confirmed. I still have the Book of Common Prayer given to me at my baptism. I didn't notice at the time (or really care) that the title page was imprinted with the word "Proposed". I just assumed everyone was baptized taking the promises of "The Baptismal Covenant" with great seriousness.

When the Reverend Jackie Means arrived at church one Sunday and was the celebrant at the Eucharist, I didn't think anything about it. She was a priest. I was not conscious that was an issue. I was part of a congregation and was connecting with my faith. With the intellectual vibrancy and open mindedness around me in the pews, I wouldn't have been able to imagine it otherwise. I had been catechized on those questions in the Baptismal Covenant. Little did I know that she was the first "regularly" ordained woman in the Episcopal Church. General Convention approved the ordination of women to the priesthood and the episcopate in the summer of 1976 and she was ordained a priest on the very first day canonically permissible (January 1, 1977). It was not until I returned to my hometown in central Illinois and visited the local parish church that I learned some thought ordination of women to the priesthood to be unusual or even evil.

What a difference 40 years have made. Today, nearly two full generations have been formed by the Book of Common Prayer (1979) and the Baptismal Covenant. Women priests and bishops have shaped the life of the Episcopal Church, the Diocese of Hawai'i, and my life. I would never have made it through seminary without Patricia Wilson-Kastner (a dear friend, the preacher at my ordination to the priesthood, and my son's godmother) and Sister Rachel Hosmer (the first woman monastic to be ordained a priest). Mentors, colleagues and friends through decades of my ordained ministry have been priests and bishops who were also women. Then in 2007, the Presiding Bishop, the Most Reverend Katharine Jeffers Schori, was chief consecrator when I was ordained a bishop.

If theology is at its heart autobiography, my encounter with God is highlighted by the ordained women who have been my pastors, priests and teachers. My journey could not have been the same without them. So, this day I give thanks to God that I have never known the Episcopal Church without a woman standing at the altar as the celebrant of the Eucharist. I give thanks to God for all the priests and bishops of the Church, but especially this day for the ordained women of our Church who make my ministry and journey in Christ fuller and joyful.

Aloha ma o Iesu Kristo, ko mākou Haku,

+Bob

The Right Reverend Robert L. Fitzpatrick
+ Keali'ikoaokeakua

For more on the Philadelphia 11 ordinations see:

<http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/ens/2014/07/28/ordination-timeline/>

<http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/ens/2014/07/28/philadelphia-11-ordinations-marked-with-calls-for-continued-justice-work/>

<http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/ens/2014/07/29/philadelphia-11-reflections-church-still-learning-from-ordinations/>