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Bread of Life, part 2

Commemoration of Women's ordination

Getting on with it: the hour has come

By the Reverend Salying Wong

Today, as we commemorate the 50th anniversary of the ordination of women in The Episcopal Church, I'm going to compare two scenes from the Gospel of John: the scene from today with the crowd who has eaten the bread that Jesus multiplied with the scene of Jesus talking with the Samaritan woman at the well. (I've inserted the passage from John 4, the scene with Jesus and the Woman, into your bulletin for your reference.) You might think I'm forcing the presence of a woman into the sermon to serve today's commemoration, but the truth is there are many parallels between these two scenes. Here are some examples:

- Both the crowd and the Samaritan woman debate with Jesus from "tradition" about authority. The crowd debates with Jesus about the manna that fed the Israelites in the wilderness, which they claim was given to them by the great Moses. The Samaritan woman debates with Jesus that right worship belongs to the Samaritans because they built their temple at the site of binding of Isaac and Jacob's well, which is much older than Jerusalem.
- Both the crowd and the Samaritan woman will be taught by Jesus, however, about a new kind of authority, authority based on having a relationship with him, a relationship in which the Spirit does whatever the Spirit wants to do, because the Spirit is not bound by tradition. These conversations about authority have a direct relevance to the struggle for women's ordination in our church. Many had claimed that the authority of the priesthood was based on having male body parts and on certain passages from scripture that limit the role of women. Those who challenged this claimed that

authority for ordination was based on a relationship with Jesus, a call, and the gifts and graces given by the Holy Spirit to answer the call.

- Both the crowd and the Samaritan woman have a diminished sense of their humanity because of their subsistence view of their lives. They see themselves as only bread-needing people; as only water-needing people. This is illustrated when they realize that Jesus is a powerful man and they misunderstand what he's offering. "Give us this bread always," says the crowd that ate the bread that Jesus multiplied. "Give me this water always," says the Samaritan Woman at the well. Building their sense of self at the bottom of Maslov's triangle of needs, they do not perceive the intrinsic human need for relationship with God, from whom they receive their life in the first place. This relationship is an umbilical cord that has never been severed, that connects them to eternity. Before there was bread, before there was water, Jesus says, "*I AM.*" *I AM*, being the name of the God of Moses and the God of the Samaritans and the God of the Jews—the God who so loves the world that he sends his Son not to condemn the world, but to save it. Jesus summarizes the meaning of his conversations with the crowd and the woman in the final verse of today's lectionary reading: "*I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.*"

There is a point at which the parallels between the crowd and the woman depart. After getting their lecture from Jesus, most of the crowd departs in disbelief. What he was saying about relationship was too hard for them. But the Samaritan woman is transformed by her conversation with Jesus. She leaves her jug behind at the well because she now understands that she is a very vessel of living water, springing from eternal life. She becomes the first evangelist and she tells the good news to all the villagers. They are first drawn toward Jesus by her, but they come to full belief, that is full relationship by their own personal contact with Jesus. The final authority is their relationship with God, which they re-discovered with her help.

In the Gospel of John, the women are the most powerful leaders. The Samaritan Woman is the first evangelist. Mary and Martha of Bethany prepare Jesus for his burial. Mary Magdalene is the apostle to the apostles of the resurrection. And, lest we forget, Jesus' mother initiates Jesus into the fullness of his ministry. At a wedding feast at Cana, the wine runs out. Jesus' mother, Mary, wants to spare the hosts the shame of running out of wine. So, she tells Jesus to do something about it. But, Jesus protests, saying, "My hour has not yet come." To which Mary says, "Oh, get on with it." Something like that. And Jesus does. He gets on with it, even before he feels ready; even before General Convention passes a resolution authorizing him to change water into wine, he gets on with it. Being ready is not a feeling; it is a culmination of inexorable momentum in the direction of the future.

The hour had come in 1944 for Li Tim Oi, when the Japanese invaded and occupied China. As missionaries and clergy left China en masse, Li Tim Oi went back in. Bishop Hall of Hong Kong ("Free China") ordained her to care for the flock in China. Li Tim Oi was like a salmon swimming against the stream of departing priests, going against the current in order to serve God's people held under occupation. But, those who swam out, those who served their priesthood in safety, roared with disapproval when they heard a woman was made a priest. In 1946, Li Tim Oi, gave up her license to officiate, but not her priesthood. The controversy was a massive distraction to the pastoral work she had. She continued to care for her flock when the Communist took over in 1948. She continued to be faithful to Jesus, when the red guard in the 1960's forced her to cut up her vestments. She continued to be a priest when she was exiled to a labor camp and was separated from her flock and her friends. Though she did not perform the liturgy of the sacraments, she herself was a sacrament and she pointed to her relationship with Jesus as the life that kept her alive.

The hour had also come on July 29, 1974, when eleven women were ordained to the priesthood by three bishops, following a defeated resolution at the previous General Convention to ordain women to the priesthood. The hour had come even if the institution was not ready. They got on with it, as Jesus' mother had advised her son. The momentum was moving inexorably into a future. With the mass

effort of lay women of the Episcopal church and their supporters, by the next General convention in 1979, the resolution to ordain women to the priesthood passed. The church was catching up with the Spirit.

Like the crowd who ate the bread that Jesus gave them, many in the Episcopal church left in disbelief when they were invited into a new relationship. So, some of them left to build churches around the old ideas of authority. That doesn't mean those who stayed have figured it all out. What is left as always is the work. Jesus told the crowd to keep working the works of God. These works are always about transforming relationships: our relationship to ourselves, our relationships to one another, our relationship to God, and today, we acknowledge, that part of that work is transforming our relationship to authority.