



Apostolic Qualifications: Witnessing While Female (And Other Crimes)

A Sermon for the Seventh Sunday of Easter, May 13, 2018

by The Rev. Dr. Clare Yarborough

Readings:

Lesson: Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

Psalm 1

Epistle: 1 John 5:9-13

The Holy Gospel: John 17:6-19

Mo. Clare Yarborough preaches the sermon, May 13, 2018

When I was starting out in the ministry game, there was a big deal made about charting our spiritual journeys, the trajectory of our relationship with God,

Jesus, the Church—and how it all came together and pointed toward the ordained ministry.

For me, my moment of truth came the first time I had ever seen a woman preside over the Eucharist. Before that I had been rather distant about church in general, culturally an Episcopalian, but I felt that, as an institution, it had little to offer. All that changed when Becky Holmes broke the Bread and said, “The gifts of God for the People of God.” The words were said by someone in my voice range, at my height, in my shape. And there it was: someone like ME inviting me to God.

She was gone within the year, in her stead was hired someone taller, deeper voice, and in the more traditional shape. The women of the parish wept. And I burned...fierce and hot. What was once seen cannot be unseen.

So, very long story short, I took the collar. Now middle school girls and boys see me preach the word, break the bread, and invite them to God on a weekly basis. That’s an image that cannot be taken away from them.

Today we are in the Seventh Sunday in Eastertide, or the Sunday of Ascensiontide. At this point in our story...

Jesus has been with them for 40 days (The Highly Significant Number in the Bible which makes you know that: a long time has passed, *and* that a transition has occurred during that time period.) No longer disciples—they have become **apostles**.

And they are so excited! For a full 40 days, Jesus was back, stronger and more vividly alive than ever before—NOW is the time for the restoration of Israel.



So, they ask, when do we get started? And Jesus lets them down, once again, “*It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.*”

And then, both in Luke and in Acts, he gives them the next set of instructions:

Stay in the city. Wait for the Spirit.

And he leaves.

Mary Magdalene announcing the resurrection to the apostles (c. 1123). St. Albans Psalter, St Godehard's Church, Hildesheim

They return to Jerusalem and were in the Temple continually blessing God...that's where the Good News of Luke ends, and the Good News of the Acts of the Apostles begins.

Begins with them waiting. Staying. Praising. Waiting. Praying. Staying. Staying. Staying. Waiting. Waiting. Waiting. Waiting for the Spirit. Anytime now. Really.

Eventually Peter got an idea...maybe there was something they were supposed to do before the arrival of the Spirit. Unstick the process. You know, get it *moving*.

Maybe...they were supposed to choose a new Apostle!

They used to be 12, but now they were 11 because of, you know, Judas and the betrayal. If indeed they were waiting for the Holy Spirit to come and help them restore Israel, then didn't they need to complete that incompleteness by getting themselves up to that original number chosen by Our Lord?

So they drew up a list of qualifications. Actually, there was only one qualification: the potential candidate HAD to have been with Jesus from the start of his baptism through to his resurrection. The candidate had to be able to really be ONE of them.

Except given the stated criterion, **no one** had the appropriate credentials. Only a handful of them actually were present at Jesus' baptism, and the only one who could have conceivably witnessed the physical death of Jesus was John. (Remember, everyone else had cut and run?) The only ones who stayed to the bitter end (aside from John) were the women. They were the first ones at the tomb on the third day!

And so THE most qualified candidate in that company was not even considered. Magdalene did not make the final cut.

The finalists were Tweedle-Dum and Tweedle-Dee, and perhaps it is fitting that the winner was decided by chance, because it probably didn't really matter much.

Tweedle-Dee was appointed to be the 12th apostle. Matthias. He fit in beautifully... like he'd always been a part of them. Because actually he *had* always been a part of them.

He is never once mentioned in Scripture again. [Shrug] Not once.

This interlude in Scripture, I have been told, is not usually one selected by preachers for this Sunday in Ascensiontide Year B. It shows just how human an institution the Church was before being sanctified by the arrival of the Holy Spirit. This passage reveals a truth about humanity: **When we surround ourselves with people who look just like us, we assume our reality is universal.**

So here's my reality:

In college I took naps in the common room in my dorm and the police weren't called.

I occasionally meet folks at Starbucks and if I want to use the bathroom, I can do that and the police aren't called.

I can get all dressed up and go eat at a Waffle House and the police aren't called.

I can go in and out of my rented AirBnb and the police aren't called.

I can even play a really slow game of golf, and although I might be called a jerk, I'm pretty sure the police won't be called.

My privilege shapes my reality in this country. As long as I cluster with people who look like me, I pretty much can get away with treating this reality as universal...

I can choose whether I even want to know if my reality differs from that of anyone else. That's MY privilege, you know.

I can even dismiss the realities of others by saying that "ah you must have done something," or "oh, you're overreacting, the police were just doing their jobs." Again, my privilege.

People in the dominant group can choose whether or not to see beyond their own reality—that's what makes the group dominant. People in the dominant group often also get to decide whether the interpreted reality of those in the "other" group is or is not valid—or "an exaggeration.". "It's not ALWAYS about race, you know!"

Truly it is not always about race. Sometimes it's about gender, or class, or education, or sexuality.

And frankly, because it is sometimes about these other things, I can absolutely understand how realities are shaped by identity.

BECAUSE, I have been an ordained woman in the church for over 20 years now and the church is very much a human institution, albeit one which has been “sanctified by the Holy Spirit”. My reality in this divinely human institution is different from those of my male counterparts.

My male counterparts have never been the only male in a room full of clergy, nor have they ever been in a job search where they are the only male.

They are never called “honey” or “dear” by funeral directors and wedding consultants. They also aren’t referred to as “sister” when wearing clericals.

They are never told “smile, it’s not so bad” or “you’re cute when you’re angry.”

They are never casually told, “I just don’t accept priests of your gender.”

This has been my background noise for decades, as a priest. It shapes my reality and the reality of other clergy women. Although seemingly minor, it has ramifications in terms of compensation and employment.



Mo. Clare Yarborough gives the Blessing as seminarian Alison Lee and Br. David Hedges assist.

The Good News for me is that in having this experience of being the “other” in ordained ministry, I am aware of the pitfalls of assuming that my reality as a white woman is shared by others who do not look like me.

We have a huge race problem in the United States because we live in a number of different realities. None of these realities can be seen as universal for all.

Having had my experiences as a woman in collar dismissed many times by male clergy (“it’s not always about gender”), I am not inclined buy into the equally dismissive “it’s not

always about race” especially when confronted with example after example of young black women and men being humiliated and harassed because some white person feels that “they” don’t belong...at Yale, in Starbucks, or eating at a Waffle House.

And as I think about it, I realize that when I say “we” have a huge race problem, I mean “we white people” are the ones with the problem. It is our work to solve our problem. Our white and largely unexamined privilege is the rot that is destroying our country quicker and more thoroughly than any Russian collusion. We have to do something about it—and by that I mean we white people.

The thing that we have to do is the last thing we are good at doing. We have to shut up. We have to listen. We have to understand different realities and not assume we get to pick the one that is “REAL” or that we understand what is really going on.

It is not the job of people of color to be our instructors in this. There are books, we need to read them. There are movies, we need to watch them. When we see ourselves as white people in less than heroic roles, we need to own it. And when we actually do something right—challenge a situation of harassment or misperception—we need to stop waiting around for a commendation or medal for being “one of the good ones.” We need to understand these experiences of ‘the other’ as they shape our own reality. Because, the head of our church, before he left, told us that we would see him again...in the face of ‘the other.’

Long ago, 120 followers of Jesus met together and decided to fill a vacancy. And because they were all too human, they filled it in all too human a manner by choosing the candidate who fit in with the rest and who shared their reality of what it was to be an apostle. The election of Matthias went forward and he was added to the list of 12. Perhaps the place needed to be filled before the Holy Spirit came down, if only to signify a restoration of wholeness in the fellowship. Who’s to say—God was silent as to whether Peter’s idea had any merit one way or another.

They had 12, a nice complete complement of apostles. But then the Holy Spirit arrived and God sent another apostle to break open up their completed even membership of 12 and throw them all into an incomplete eternally open-ended fellowship of 13...

He was not at all like the other 12. He was literate, he was part of the Jerusalem elite, and he had never met Jesus in the flesh.

His vision was not merely the restoration of Israel, he had his eyes on an impossibly grander vision: the restoration of All Creation. In his vision there was abundant room for Greeks, Jews, Slaves, Masters, Men, and Women.

Paul. A Jew, a Pharisee, a Roman citizen, an intellectual, a poet, a visionary, and oftentimes a royal pain in the butt. The apostle who spent most of his time being thrown into prison, in prison, or being run out of town. A man who became all things to all people—and who deliberately searched out the other in any gathering to bring them to

Christ. Paul was not what the fellowship of apostles wanted; but he was definitely what they needed in order to proceed.

As Christians we share in an experience of Christ and that gives us a new reality. It is the reality of the Holy Spirit that compels us to go outside of our own comfort in the name of Christ to bind up a broken world, to forgive the unforgiven, and to preach the Good News of another way of being. A way of being that stands with those on the margins—because that is where we will meet Jesus. Not in the smoky back rooms of the powerful, not in the cushioned pews of our churches, but slammed up against a wall outside a Waffle House.

It's hard work. We may not always be successful. We may get tired. We may be uncomfortable. We may even fail.

May? No will. Will be tired. Will be uncomfortable. Will even meet failure. Still, we are driven to do the work. Because we may be in the world but we do not have to be "of" the world.

We may be liturgically in Ascensiontide, waiting to celebrate the Holy Spirit. But actually, she blew through here centuries ago...

She's with us now ready to fuel us with all the power we need to do the work.

We have a reality to share—of abundance in scarcity, unity through diversity, hope in the midst of despair, and life beyond death. This reality can transcend every reality—but it's up to us to share and make it universal.

The wait is over. Time to get busy.

Amen.