The CATHEDRAL of ST. PHILIP
SERVING ATLANTA AND THE WORLD

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The Hands in the Middle

A meditation for the commemoration of Adeline Blanchard Tyler and her Companions
by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell
Vespers with Holy Eucharist
at Peachtree Hills Place

Jesus has just heard that John the Baptist is dead. He gets into a boat and goes off to a deserted place to grieve.

The crowds follow him anyway. They walk around the shore and are waiting when he lands. And when Jesus sees them, Matthew says, he has compassion on them and heals their sick.

By evening the disciples have had enough. “This is a deserted place, and the hour is late. Send the crowds away so they can buy food for themselves.”

Jesus says, “They need not go away. You give them something to eat.”

“We have nothing here,” they answer, “but five loaves and two fish.”

“Bring them here to me.”

Then comes the part we know by heart. Jesus takes the bread, looks up to heaven, blesses it, and breaks it. But watch what happens next. He gives the loaves to the disciples, and the disciples give them to the crowds.

There is a pair of hands between Jesus and the hungry. The bread passes from his hands into theirs, and from theirs to the people sitting on the grass.

That is a good picture of a deacon. A deacon has hands in the middle.

Paul ends his letter to the Romans by commending another pair of hands: “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae… for she has been a benefactor of many, and of myself as well.” Phoebe is the first person in Christian history named as a deacon. Most scholars think she carried that very letter to Rome. If they are right, the greatest letter Paul ever wrote reached the Church in a deacon’s hands.

Adeline Blanchard Tyler stands in Phoebe’s line.

She was a schoolteacher in Boston. She married a widower, the father of four children, and when his health failed, she cared for him. That was where she learned to nurse: at one bedside, in her own home, with no one watching.

By the time she was fifty she was a widow. In 1856 she left Boston for Baltimore to lead St. Andrew’s Infirmary. A deacon in Massachusetts, Daphne Noyes, has recently found good evidence that that September, Adeline Tyler and three younger women were set apart as deaconesses, the first in the Episcopal Church. They were set apart on the Feast of St. Matthew, whose Gospel we have just heard.

Five loaves and two fish. A fifty-year-old widow with some experience at a sickbed. It does not look like much to bring to a hungry crowd. But Jesus says the same thing to her that he said to the disciples: “Bring them here to me.”

Then the war came. Adeline Tyler nursed soldiers in military hospitals in Baltimore; Chester, Pennsylvania; and

Annapolis, Union and Confederate alike.

Hear that again: Union and Confederate alike. On the hillside, Jesus did not ask who in the crowd deserved bread. He did not sort them by loyalty or by worth. The disciples carried the bread to everyone sitting on the grass. In a country tearing itself apart, Adeline Tyler did the same thing at the bedside.

Isaiah tells us what that kind of faithfulness looks like: “Is not this the fast that I choose… to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house… and not to hide yourself from your own kin?” Then comes the promise: “Your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly.”

We should be honest about the cost. Noyes writes that the war took a toll on Tyler. She saw the horrors of war. Hands in the middle get tired. They carry what is given to them, and they also touch every wound in the crowd.

Matthew knows that, too. Remember where the story began: Jesus came to that deserted place carrying his own grief. The compassion that fed five thousand people came from a heart that had just been broken.

So the Church does not remember Adeline Tyler as someone who never wore out. We remember her as someone whose hands were filled again and again by Christ, and who kept passing what she received to whoever was in front of her.

Notice the last detail in the story. When everyone has eaten, the disciples gather up what is left: twelve baskets full. There is one basket for each of them. The hands that carry bread to the crowd are fed too.

Psalm 103 sings of that: “Bless the Lord, O my soul… He forgives all your sins and heals all your infirmities; he redeems your life from the grave and crowns you with mercy and loving-kindness; he satisfies you with good things, and your youth is renewed like an eagle’s.”

That psalm is for everyone who has worn themselves out caring for others. It is for the nurse at the end of a double shift. It is for the son or daughter at a parent’s bedside, and for the deacon who goes home empty. There is a basket for you.

For a long time Adeline Tyler’s story was nearly lost. It took a deacon’s patient research to bring it back. That seems right. Ministry in the middle is easy to overlook. Most of the people who fed that crowd on the hillside never had their names written down. Phoebe gets only two verses. But God sees every pair of hands that passes on the bread.

In a few minutes we will come forward with our own hands open. Christ will take bread, bless it, break it, and give it. Then, at the end of the service, the deacon will send us out: “Let us go forth in the name of Christ.” Every baptized person is given hands in the middle. We receive bread so that we can carry it out.

We may feel we have very little: a few loaves, a couple of fish, some experience at a single bedside. That is all Adeline Tyler had, and Jesus says the same thing to us that he said to her:

“Bring them here to me.”

Amen.

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