

**“What Exactly Is a Deacon?”**  
**Matthew 4:12-23**  
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**First Baptist Church, Raleigh**  
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What exactly is a deacon? We’re going to ordain five of them today. It would be good to have some idea of what the role involves and what we expect of these leaders.

People have many different images of what a deacon is and this is largely a function of our experience. Some have had good experiences with deacons as caregivers and spiritual leaders, even thoughtful decision makers. Others have had bad experiences with deacons resisting change, attacking leaders. At least one member of our church named his dog Deacon, but this was for the Demon Deacons of Wake Forest University. And for those of us who consider the dog to be a scared creation, having a dog named for us is a good thing.

But what is a deacon in the history of the church? Most of us know that the Greek word *diakonos* means servant, as in a table servant. We think the very first deacons in the church are described in Acts 6, though they are not called deacons in the text. What gives rise to their calling is that church members are not all being cared for adequately. The Hellenists’ widows are not receiving the same care as the Hebrews’ widows. The apostles need to give their time to preaching and teaching. So, seven people are appointed for a new role that involves care and they are blessed in the way we will bless deacons today.

Beyond the New Testament period, deacons are servant leaders, caregivers, those who make sure the needs of people are met, especially vulnerable people like widows and orphans. Over time, in Baptist churches especially, since our forbearers did not retain the role of elder, deacons also became spiritual leaders along with pastors. But there wasn’t any involvement in administrative matters until very recently.

Early on there wasn’t much to administer – there were no facilities or staff or budgets - and even if there had been, this work would not have been considered as important as spiritual leadership and the care of

people. When boards of directors became part of corporate American and non-profit work, the term “board of deacons” was coined and it reflected a shift in thinking about the role in many churches, but you will never hear a pastor or biblical scholar use this term.

This is not to say that administrative work is not important or that there is anything wrong with deacons taking on some of it. It’s just that in the long history of the church, deacons are servants, caregivers and spiritual leaders.

And lest it seems like this is minimizing the role, I would point out that it is a role based on the example of Jesus. In Matthew 20:26-28, after criticizing what people in his culture say about leadership, that it is about lording it over others like a tyrant, Jesus says this. “It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.” This is what deacons are called to do – serve. This is what our bylaws ask deacons to do. And make no mistake, it is a high calling!

But, of course, the truth is it is what we are all called to do, who we are all called to be. In the story we have read today from Matthew 4, Jesus is presented as the one who will fulfill Isaiah’s prophecy about light coming into the world. Jesus brings light by calling people to repentance and proclaiming that the kingdom of heaven has come near. He then calls disciples - Simon and Andrew, James and John. They are fishermen, but Jesus calls them to leave their nets and follow him, to do what he does. But what exactly does this involve? What does he do?

Our reading ends with a summary of what we find throughout the Gospels. “Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in the synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.” That is, he preaches and teaches and cares for the sick and needy, the wounded and broken, the outcast and marginalized. In other words, he serves in humble ways.

This is what we are all called to do and this is what we do – some of us right here in the clothing ministry every week, some of us on short-term trips to places like Honduras; some of us in formal church activities

like Sunday School and worship, music and missions programs, special outreach efforts like the hot chocolate give-away at the Holiday Parade and the block party and Theology on Tap, and some of us in our daily lives at work and school and home. All of us are called to follow Jesus in proclaiming the good news, teaching people about God's reign and extending compassion to hurting people. And we do follow Jesus in these ways.

So, what then is special about deacons? Deacons, along with ministers, are leaders in this path, those who show the way by who they are and what they do. Deacons are those who lead by example following the ultimate example we have in Jesus.

And deacons in our church do this - some through formal deacon roles like visiting the homebound or leading worship at the men's shelter, some through other roles as teachers or committee members, some just through their daily lives, the way they treat other people or the work they do. Not every act of service is publicized. In fact, most are performed humbly without any need for recognition. And not every act of leadership is highly visible. Many lead simply by being who they are in the Jesus way of kindness and compassion.

I think of a deacon in another setting who never wanted to be at the front of the room. He would pray if called upon, but felt awkward doing so. He certainly didn't want to chair any group. But if someone needed a ride somewhere or a visit or a meal, he was always available, he always made the time, he always stepped in and helped. He was as fine a deacon as I have known. This is what a deacon does. This is who a deacon is.

This past weekend we honored the prophetic ministry of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. People in many different settings reflected upon his life and sought to remember what was most important about it. On February 4, 1968, at Ebenezer Baptist Church, two months before he was killed, Dr. King talked about how he wanted people to remember him.

If any of you are around when I have to meet my day, I don't want a long funeral. And if you get somebody to deliver the eulogy, tell

them not to talk too long. And every now and then I wonder what I want them to say. Tell them not to mention that I have a Nobel Peace Prize—that isn't important. Tell them not to mention that I have three or four hundred other awards—that's not important. Tell them not to mention where I went to school. I'd like somebody to mention that day that Martin Luther King, Jr. tried to give his life serving others. I'd like for somebody to say that day that Martin Luther King, Jr. tried to love somebody. I want you to say that day that I tried to be right on the war question. I want you to be able to say that day that I did try to feed the hungry. And I want you to be able to say that day that I did try in my life to clothe those who were naked. I want you to say on that day that I did try in my life to visit those who were in prison. I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity.

It would be a good way for any of us to be remembered. It is a good way for any of us to live. It is the calling for all in the Jesus community, but especially for deacons – to love and serve humanity. It may seem simple, ordinary, mundane. But it is a high calling. It's the calling to be like Jesus in everything we say and do. It doesn't get any higher than that!