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Today we are celebrating the 50th anniversary of the ordination of women on July 29th, 1974. This fall we will be hosting a screening and dinner for the documentary *The Philadelphia 11* which goes deeper into their stories and their impact than I could possibly do this morning. I hope you will all join us.

This story also has a more personal note for me. About 10 years prior my grandmother Marjorie, which some of you knew, was getting her undergraduate degree in Theology at Barnard. While she had an interest in pursuing that further when she graduated there were scarce employment opportunities for women with a graduate degree in Theology. Instead, after she finished she went on to become a teacher in a private school. I don't know if she would have been interested in the priesthood, but her story is similar to so many other women before her. The fight to allow women to become priests was also about giving women the ability to make that choice for themselves.

The first 11 women were ordained at the Church of the Advocate in Philadelphia. Their names are Merrill Bittner, Alla Bozarth-Campbell, Alison Cheek, Emily Hewitt, Carter Heyward, Suzanne Hiatt, Marie Moorefield, Jeanette Piccard, Betty Schiess, Katrina Swanson, and Nancy Wittig.

Four years prior, at the National Convention in 1970 women were ordained as deacons for the first time and were allowed to attend as voting delegates. At the Convention a resolution was brought to formally allow women to be ordained to the priesthood, but it did not pass. The same resolution failed again in 1973. There was nothing in the Canons at the time that specifically said this wasn't allowed and yet women continued to be denied the right. The ordinations in 1974 were in direct opposition to these decisions. While the event was celebratory, it might be more accurately described as an act of civil disobedience and an intentional form of protest against the Church.

Dr. Charles Willie, was one of the four bishops who performed the service. He was a prominent Black priest and civil rights leader. He said, "We stand ready to endure the hardship and the personal sacrifice necessary to pull the Episcopal Church from its mistaken way of refusing to acknowledge the full personhood of women. We believe it is a Christian duty to disobey unjust laws."

Bishop Barbara Harris who was the crucifer at the ordination, went on to be the first elected female bishop ever in the global Anglican Church in 1988. In the lead up to her

consecration as Bishop she received so much hate and so many death threats the police suggested she wear a bullet-proof vest to the service. When asked about it in an interview years later she simply said, "Nobody can hate like Christians". Which sadly feels just as true today as it ever has.

Getting back to 1974, immediately following the ordination service there was an emergency meeting of the bishops where they declared that this was invalid and that these women could not perform the sacraments. They would also go on to censure the bishops who had done the service.

Less well known, but no less important, was the ordination of five additional women in Washington D.C. the following year. After, The House of Bishops banned Bishop Barrett, who had performed both this service and the one the previous year, from acting as a minister for a time. As Dr. Willie said, it was more important to show these ordinations were going to continue until the rules were changed than whatever personal impact it might have on the individuals involved. This was an institution they loved but was acting unjustly and they were going to fight to move the Church towards necessary progress. At the National Convention in 1976 the rules would finally change, two years after those initial ordinations.

Progress can be a slow moving machine. In 1982 there was an article in the New York Times about women who were Episcopal priests. They were focusing on Martha Blacklock who was running a religious theater group trying to find new ways for the Church to reach people. In that article it says, "Today there are more than 500 female Episcopal priests in the United States...Most of the women serve as curates, social workers, hospital chaplains, psychoanalysts and cathedral staff. Very few have parishes of their own. Those who do tend to have small ones, or those with a specialized ministry of some sort." Similar to Martha. To the best of my research abilities I found that as of 2022, 40% of all active Episcopal priests were women, an impressive change.

It is an important reminder to us that the work to shift cultural thinking takes continued groundwork, work with our community, and difficult person-to-person conversations. For many years people have discussed how churches are in an important period of transition and I think this is an excellent time to ask ourselves how we might help to continue to move the needle of progress. As we celebrate this 50th anniversary it is also an important reminder that we must continue to evaluate our religious institutions and beliefs to make sure that they are upholding values we can support with our whole being.

Amen.