

## Servant Children

*Homily preached by the Rev. Peter James Lee, Rector, in the Chapel of the Cross, Chapel Hill, N.C.*

*February 13, 1977*

Pauli, my dear sister in Christ, you remind us vividly by your presence that the Christian faith is radically specific, grounded in history, related to real people, to flesh and blood, to the grandeur and degradation of human life as it is.

What we experience, my brothers and sisters, in this moment is an intensification of that specific character of Christian faith.

Pauli, you stand at the lectern given in memory of Mary Ruffin Smith, the slaveholder who brought your grandmother, Cornelia, to baptism in this chapel on December 20, 1854. You have read to us the Gospel from the cherished Bible that Mary Ruffin Smith gave your grandmother and that you and your grandmother read to one another years ago. Those purple ribbons marking the place recall another chapter in our common history. They came to you in 1944 with a box of flowers to mark your graduation from Howard University Law School, a gift from Eleanor Roosevelt.

You are a woman. You are a Negro, that proud description for which you fought so valiantly and which you will not let passing fashion take from you.

Tonight you stand among us as a priest, a pontiff, that Latin word that means "bridge," and in your priesthood, you recall to all of us our priesthood, our call to be bridge builders in a broken world.

The Parish Register of the Chapel of the Cross records your grandmother's baptism in an entry dated December 20, 1854, with these words: "Five servant children belonging to Miss Mary Ruffin Smith." And then your grandmother, Cornelia, is listed along with her brother and her three sisters, and the simple conclusion, "The mother's name is Harriet."

Finally, in 1977, America, white and black, knows something of the awesome power of oppression, represented in those words.

But your presence tonight as a bridge builder helps us reclaim that baptismal description and to invest it with new and yet its ancient meaning. "Five servant children belonging to Miss Mary Ruffin Smith."

Can those words now apply to each us as we minister to the world and support one another? Is there a better description of the pilgrim people of Christ than “servant children” who “belong” to one another?

Servanthood. Children of a loving God. Belonging, in mutual respect and dignity, to one another.

Cornelia Smith Fitzgerald won her freedom in Christ in her baptism in this place. And in so doing, she belonged to Mary Ruffin Smith, and Mary to her, in an entirely new relationship.

In the communion of saints, those gallant ladies are surely present here at this moment. Serving us. Serving God. And belonging for all eternity to us and to the Lord.

So, Pauli, my sister, my brothers and sisters, tonight is a moment of recovery, of reconciliation, of our renewed commitment as servant children who belong to one another, and to the Lord who commands us to serve the world in his name.

*This homily was preached at the first celebration of the Eucharist by the Rev. Dr. Pauli Murray which was also the first celebration of the Eucharist by a woman priest in North Carolina.*