Adeline Blanchard Tyler: The First Deaconess

In late August 2021, Deacon Geri Swanson (New York) — speaking in a Episcopal Parish Network (then known as CEEP) webinar about early Episcopal deaconesses — mentioned Adeline Blanchard Tyler (1805-1875), a widow from Boston. As a Bostonian of sorts (I live across the river in Cambridge), my interest was piqued. So I did what one does: Google. I found information at the Library of Congress, Wikipedia, and a few other places, but it was an entry from the Boston Children's Hospital Archives program that marked what would become a point of no return in my quest to learn more about this woman, described as "a fearless re-inventor of her own life."

I quickly arranged a visit to the hospital archives. How can I describe the thrill of finding a collection of nearly 100 letters to and from Mrs. Tyler, written between 1869 and 1873? Some were written on impossibly thin onionskin paper, in a rushed, slanted hand. Others were on creamy, black-bordered stationery, bespeaking a recent death in the family. Most, addressed to "My dear Sister," were to her younger sister Catherine (Blanchard) Gilman, in Baltimore. In others, she solicited and received counsel from her spiritual director, Maryland Bishop William Rollinson Whittingham, as she pondered major decisions — where to serve, and under whose authority. A handful were from a young priest, Charles Chapman Grafton, who while at St. Paul's in Baltimore "was chaplain to a house of Deaconesses…under Mrs. Tyler."

But how did Mrs. Tyler come to be in Maryland, and to be The First Deaconess? In 1856, Horace Stringfellow, rector of St. Andrew's in Baltimore, had heard of her charitable work at the church of the Advent in Boston where the rector, Bishop Horatio Southgate, had established a House for Widows and Aged People and a Parish School. There she was known as "The Abbess" (probably not to her face). Eager to expand the parish's ministry by establishing an infirmary, invited her to be its head; surely having both her sister and Elizabeth Philpot Blanchard, her brother's widow, living nearby added to the appeal. She arrived in September 1856, accompanied by her friend Carrie Guild, also from Boston. On St Matthews's Day, the infirmary was formally opened by Bishop Whittingham; the service included Holy Communion and "the solemn setting apart of Mrs Adeline Tyler and three other ladies [Carrie Guild, Evaline Black, Catherine Minard] for the work of Deaconesses in the Diocese of Maryland."

I spent the remainder of 2021 and early 2022 visiting the Children's Archives weekly, going through the collection, deciphering her difficult handwriting — why do her r's and n's and u's and s's look so much alike? — and learning more about her challenges, sorrows, and joys. I pieced together a timeline of her life, as well as a family tree to help me sort multiple people called Lizzie. Her relationship with Whittingham and other leading Anglo-Catholic clerics of the day emerged as a primary theme. Between visits, I continued my pursuit of The First Deaconess at my home office (the kitchen table).

What does plumbing the depths this particular deaconess's life have to do with my ministry — my identity — as a deacon? A large part of the answer is found in the eternal power of telling stories. Is that not what we do when we proclaim the gospel? Just weeks before the coronavirus shut everything down, I had retired from longtime parish service; suddenly I found myself separated from my family and severed from my community. The time spent delving into resources that could reveal, bit by bit, the story of The First Deaconess became my steady occupation during the long months of solitude.

When I read of the brave actions of Mrs. Tyler (for so I must call her out of respect) in Baltimore during the Civil War, where she faced down a crusty police official in order to remove two severely wounded Massachusetts soldiers from his custody so she could care for them in her home (which she did, successfully); or her supervision of the US Naval Hospital in Annapolis where 1,000 men relied on her and her team of "lady nurses;" or the deep affection she held for the "fallen women" who sought refuge at the Midnight Mission in New York — when I read of these things, I was transported out of my small, pandemic-circumscribed world, and found a measure of comfort and companionship and more than a hint of holiness.

I grew to appreciate more and more the archivists, librarians, biographers, historians and others who work to preserve the fragments of the past, which is our "goodly heritage." I have come to understand that the title, and the role, of "deaconess" is a far cry from what I had expected it to be, at least in the case of Mrs. Tyler. There is no evidence that being set apart as a deaconess is something she sought out or longed for, but there is every reason to believe that deaconess is who, and what, she was called to be. Arthur Cleveland Coxe, rector of Baltimore's Grace Church from 1853 to 1863, remarked: "She seemed raised up for this purpose. Her talent was great and her spirit indomitable. How few have been found to follow her. How much yet remains to be done before such thoughts as were in her heart shall be realized in practically every diocese."

Neither her accomplishments nor the accolades of famous men should dull or distract from the very real challenges that she faced. Her post in the Chester, Pennsylvania, Military Hospital, where she served from 1862 to 1863, was "one of plain duty… bringing order out of chaos… I have met with all sorts of discouragements. …Yesterday we received 250 sick and wounded men, 24 of whom are Confederates. Two of them are very ill. One was baptized this evening. I stood sponsor for him—have just left him for the night a little more comfortable than he was in the morning." In 1869, she returned to Boston to become the first Lady Superintendent of the new Children's Hospital, where the household consisted of as many as twenty young patients with maladies ranging from measles and pneumonia to fevers and fractures. She lamented, "a succession of claims upon me have used me up mind & body."

Yet throughout her labors in Maryland, Pennsylvania, New York, and Massachusetts, she tended to her own spiritual health and that of others. Just days after arriving in Baltimore, she reported "I have been very busily engaged this morning in preparing our little Chapel for service, hoping to enjoy the united prayers of our Christian band within its walls." She later established an oratory at the Church Home and Infirmary, and at the Children's Hospital (initially located in a modest home on Rutland Street): "We have been having two services every week at the Hospital & now our oratory is so far completed as to use it. We shall enjoy them much more than before. The oratory is very high up being a part of the attic; it is nicely finished with a very nice altar of oak with painted panels."

For his 1983 book *Children's Hospital: Built Better Than They Knew,* Clement Smith, MD, made a careful study of Mrs. Tyler's correspondence. In his notes, he highlighted a passage from a December 1872 letter: "How changed are our Xmas congratulations since the last anniversary — so many gone to rest, while we toil on in the sad enjoyment of the blessings and trials that beset our way." Dr. Smith noted, "These words seem to me the epitome of Adeline Blanchard Tyler's outlook on life." To which I can only say, *Amen*.