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*The Feast of Florence Li Tim-Oi*

Around this time two years ago I was in Hong Kong for a three week visit with the Anglican Church there, it was part of my last semester in seminary. I had written a grant to go study this little but mighty, and important, Province of the Anglican Communion, which the Episcopal Church, and by extension we at St. Andrew's, are part of. I was there for two reasons: 1) I love dim sum and Guangdong food and I wanted straight from the source, and 2) because the urban church there has so many layers of complexity to deal with, politically, globally, and locally. I wanted to write about the generational divide within the city, through the lens of the Anglican Church. For those who may not know, Hong Kong island is at the mouth of the Pearl River Delta, and thirty-five miles east across the mouth of the river is Macau. Hong Kong and Macau were British and Portuguese colonies, respectively.

I tell you all of this to set a backdrop for the woman we are celebrating today, Florence Li Tim-Oi, who was born in the village of Aberdeen on Hong Kong Island in May of 1908. I knew of her before going, as we celebrated her feast in seminary. Her name, Tim-Oi, means "much beloved daughter" in Cantonese. When girls were born, many families at that time did one of two things: they'd drown the infant with ashes because they couldn't afford to raise her and pay a dowry, or, if one were wealthy, the young infant girl's feet would be broken and bound. This would render them essentially homebound for life. Girls without bound feet were peasants, working in the fields or taking care of their homebound mistresses, carrying them if they needed to go anywhere.

Tim-Oi was born to a father who lived and worked for the British on Hong Kong Island, and thus had a very different view of how his daughter might be raised. Mr. Li was a medical doctor turned head-of-school, and an Anglican, so he brought his children up through the church. He encouraged Tim-Oi to go to girl's school, though he could not pay for it, so she wasn't able to start until she was 14 years old. This was because she was one child in a family of five brothers and one sister aside from herself. She was in and out of school until she turned 27. While still in school she was baptized and took the name of her patron, Florence Nightingale, because she wanted to become a nurse and live selflessly, and the name Florence sounds like 'flower.' Remember, she was born in May. In 1931, towards the end of her secondary school years, she attended an ordination for a British deaconess at a St. John's Cathedral in central Hong Kong. I want to be clear, that deaconesses served important though unrecognized roles throughout much of the Anglican Church at this time and were never afforded the same dignities as their ordained male counterparts, crucial as these women were.

During that service, a Chinese preacher asked the native women in the congregation if there was anyone who felt called to serve the Chinese church. Florence knelt down at that time and contemplated Isaiah 6: "Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I; send me!'"

It took a few years, and a little encouragement from her local rector, who said to her, "It is good for a girl to study theology," before she began a four year course of study at a seminary in Guangzhou, also called Canton, 75 miles north of Hong Kong on the mainland along the Pearl River. During her time there, the terrors of WWII, known in Asia as the Sino-Japanese War, befell the whole of China. The nation had already been going through turmoil as the Nationalists, led by Chiang Kai-shek,

were battling the communist rebels under Mao Zedong. Those hostilities ceased as Japanese bombers leveled whole cities, and together the Nationalists and Communists, with material aid from the United States, began to fight side-by-side against the invaders. In June of 1938, Florence left Guangzhou to return to Hong Kong, and on her way saw the waves of refugees fleeing the lethal onslaught.

Having returned to her home city, she was assigned as a lay worker to a church by Ronald Hall, the bishop of Hong Kong, helping refugees from the mainland find space and food. Neither she nor Bishop Hall knew at the time the legacy that they would forge together. Bishop Hall's diocese was immense, stretching from Hong Kong to inland China, all the way down to the Vietnamese border, and included Macao. In 1940, a Chinese Anglican priest in Macao, stationed at Morrison Chapel, wrote to Bishop Hall to address the increasing difficulty of his duties, and asked specifically if Florence Li could be assigned to his parish to aid refugees there. She undertook that dangerous journey to Macao, and her work was so impactful there that she was ordained a deacon (a quirk of history, the Chinese Anglicans made no distinction between deacons and deaconesses). On May 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1941, at St. John's Cathedral in Hong Kong, the same place she first knelt and received her call, Florence was ordained by Bishop Hall. A few days later, she made the hard journey back to Macau.

Christmas Day of that year the Japanese wrested control of Hong Kong from the British after a horrific period of bombardment and fighting at the borders in the New Territories. Bishop Hall was not in Hong Kong at the time, which turned out to be a blessing, because he could continue to operate as bishop while in mainland China. Things were far worse for the Anglican Church in Hong Kong, as the disarray of occupation, and the suspicion of Anglican priests as British spies, made any public ministry nearly impossible. For Florence, though, there was another issue: her father was retired in the New Territories, where the worst of the fighting had taken place. She made an insanely treacherous voyage from Macao to the New Territories, disguised as an older woman, to find her father. On her way across the Delta her boat was chased and nearly sunk by a Japanese ship, had it not been for a powerful rain storm and the knowledge of the fisherman she hired to take her. They also had to escape from thieves along the riverbank, looking for opportunities to steal from fisherman during the chaos of war. When they finally hit land, she had to hide herself on a vegetable cart to pass through Japanese checkpoints. She managed to find her father, who did not recognize her at first because of her disguise and charter their way back to Hong Kong as part of a larger refugee convoy. After they got on their boat, the Japanese arrived and sunk or killed all those on the banks of the river. The Pearl River ran red with blood.

A month later Florence returned to her ministry in Macao, and the local priest had been reassigned. This is where Florence's ministry really gets interesting. Because there was no longer a resident priest, she could baptize, marry and bury where a deacon at that time had no such authority. But because she was a woman and a deacon, she was not allowed to preside at Holy Communion. Occasionally a priest could make the journey from Hong Kong. When this became utterly untenable, the local assistant bishop in Macao, Bishop Mok, wrote a letter allowing her to preside over Eucharist, citing the extreme case of war and the desperation of the people and the church. She would later recall, "I had assisted at the Eucharist before, with other priests. The first time by myself it was lonely. But I was so happy I could help the refugees spiritually as well as try to help them materially." She essentially acted as a priest in everything but name, and as a doctor, healing the wounded of those fleeing death and conflict, for two years. Many of those refugees would receive her help and then go further inland to "free China," reaching as far as Chongqing in southwest China, where Bishop Hall was doing his best to rally his massive and disrupted diocese. Upon hearing of her work, and of her presiding at Eucharist, he came to a stunning conclusion:

Florence, a woman, was essentially acting as a priest. Ah the scandal, but alas, he saw the necessity, and knowing that word would eventually make it out of China, Bishop Hall wrote the Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple about the matter.

The main purpose of this letter is a promise I made to the bishops of Chungking that I wrote to you about Deaconess Lei Tim-oi in Macao. In order that a congregation of 150 folk may have sacraments I have given her permission to celebrate the Lord's Supper. If I could reach her physically I should ordain her priest rather than give her permission, as that seems to me more contrary to the tradition and meaning of the ordained ministry than to ordain a woman. . . . I have not informed anyone else, except the bishops, of what I have done, but I am afraid it may soon become common property. I'm not an advocate for the ordination of women. I am however determined that no prejudices should prevent the congregations committed to my care having the sacraments of the Church. . .

Ever the pragmatist, Bishop Hall then wrote another letter, this time to Deacon Li: "If you dare to come and meet me, it is good that you be ordained priest and given a proper right to do your work." Her parish upon hearing the news, raised funds for her journey and blessed her. On January 25<sup>th</sup>, 1944, after three days of discussion with her bishop, Florence was ordained a priest, a move without precedent in the Anglican Church. Bishop Hall wrote another letter two days after, again to Archbishop Temple, explaining his action. Because of unreliable communications during wartime, neither letter reached Temple until well after the event, and it was a good thing too, because he, like so many, did not approve. Bishop Hall would later defend his action as merely confirming the work of the Holy Spirit.

There was such uproar that by the end of the war, the Archbishop of Canterbury along with many bishops across the globe, called for the removal of her orders. Bishop Hall left it to Rev. Li, and while she resigned her role as priest she did not give up her holy orders. She was placed at a parish along the border of Vietnam. That time ended when the Great Leap Forward closed her church and it became a government building in 1951. Florence was not heard or seen by Anglicans again until 1980. Because she was a priest and an Anglican, she was held with extreme suspicion as an Imperialist working with Britain. She was forced into agricultural labor and then factory work. She was finally able to pay for and allowed to visit family in Toronto in 1980, where she remained. She was received as a priest there in 1983, and her ordination was celebrated with her presence at Westminster Abbey in 1984, her forty-year anniversary. She died in Toronto in 1992.

There is so much more to tell about this amazing woman's life, to say about her and the impact her servant leadership as the first female priest in the Anglican Communion, and I hope I can say those things someday. But I want to end here today: if she could hear her call despite all the social, political, and practical factors that had been set against her, what can we, St. Andrew's, discover by listening for God among us? I don't think we are all called to ordained ministry, but each and every one of us is called to something by God, whether at home, or work, or in community. May we listen with heart and humility to Rev. Florence Li Tim-Oi, and may we respond with her love, patience, and fortitude.