

Commemoration of Adeline Blanchard Tyler and her Companions

Readings: Isaiah 58:1-12; Psalm 103:1-6; Romans 16:1-2, 25-27; Matthew 14:13-21

Preface of a Saint 1

Collect: Merciful God, who endowed Adeline and her companions with faith and courage, wisdom and humility, and called them to serve you as deaconesses, ministering to the sick, the oppressed, and the poor: By your grace, grant that we, following their example, may live to serve you as they did, revealing your steadfast love to the world, through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Adeline Blanchard Tyler (1805-1875) was the first Episcopal deaconess. Along with Caroline (Carrie) Elizabeth Guild (1827-1880), Eveline Black (1825-1875), and Catherine Minard (1837-1917), she was admitted to the office of deaconess on the 4th of November 1856. Accepting the threefold charge to be “servants of the Lord Jesus; servants to the sick and poor and needy, of every class, for Jesus’ sake; and servants to one another,” they provided nursing care, religious and practical education, material support, and advocacy at the newly established St. Andrew’s Infirmary in Baltimore. They cared for men, women, and children, Black and white, from near and far, and would become known as the United Deaconesses of Maryland.

Previously, Adeline had been a member of Boston’s Trinity Church, where she was among the founders of Trinity Hall, a Sunday School for poor children; the Episcopal City Mission; and St. Stephen’s Chapel. After joining the Church of the Advent in 1846 (where she would later sponsor Carrie Guild for baptism), Adeline continued in her works of Christian charity, becoming Matron of the Parish School, which the rector described as “a place of instruction for children of the Parish especially those who are poor and uncared for. We have about 50 children... 10 are the children of colored Parishioners.”

In 1856, the Rev. Horace Stringfellow, rector of St. Andrew’s Church in Baltimore, invited Adeline to head his new infirmary, the fulfillment of his vision to emulate the nursing Sisterhoods and Deaconess hospitals he had seen in England and France. Adeline and Carrie arrived in Baltimore from Boston that September. They joined Eveline Black and Catherine Minard, who had been working with Stringfellow since 1855 at St. Andrew’s Church, but did not become deaconesses until Bishop Whittingham formally assumed “Pastoral Supervision and Visitorial care of your Sisterhood and of the Infirmary and Schools” on November 4, 1856. Soon the four original Deaconesses were joined by two associates, identified as Miss Hickey and Miss Martin. The report of the Infirmary’s first year notes 53 patients admitted, 88 out-door patients, 756 visits made, 93 children in the Charity School, 500 garments and 85 pairs of shoes distributed, 5 patients baptized, 4 confirmed, 8 admitted to their “first reception of the Holy Communion.”

In April 1861, after the attack on Fort Sumter and President Lincoln’s urgent call for troops to protect Washington, volunteers from the Massachusetts Sixth Regiment passing through Baltimore encountered a violent mob. That evening, upon learning that severely wounded soldiers had been

taken to the Central Police Station, Adeline went there to request that they be released to her care — and was denied. After another unsuccessful attempt, she told the officer in charge, “I am myself a Massachusetts woman, seeking to do good to the citizens of my own state. If not allowed to do so I shall immediately send a telegram to Governor Andrew, informing him that my request has been denied.” This convinced the officer to release the two most critically injured men to Adeline. She had them transported to the Deaconess House where they spent weeks recovering.

The need for experienced nurses and hospital superintendents during the Civil War led Adeline to the Camden Street Hospital in Baltimore, where she ministered to both Union and Confederate soldiers with an evenhandedness that sparked accusations by some of being “a Rebel sympathizer.” Shortly thereafter, at the request of Dorothea Dix, she was placed in charge of the military hospital in Chester, Pennsylvania, where her colleagues included volunteer nurses from Maine and Massachusetts. They often had 1,000 men under their care. By early 1863 Adeline was in charge of the military hospital at the former Naval Academy in Annapolis, again with members of the nursing cohort who had served at Chester. She died on January 9, 1875.