

## CELEBRATE ST. MATTHEW'S: FIVE Cs

*A sermon preached on Sunday, November 1, 2009, All Saint's Day, at St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in Bedford, New York, by the Rector, the Reverend Terence L. Elsberry.*

No question about it, we live in an age of acronyms. From government to business to the entertainment world, acronyms abound. The internet has its own list of most-used e-mail acronyms. Maybe you use some of these yourself in your e-mail communications:

GD&R Grin, Duck and Run  
IMHO In My Humble Opinion  
IMNSHO In My Not So Humble Opinion  
BTDT Been There Done That  
And for those of us of a certain age:  
BMUS Beam Me Up Scotty  
WYSIWYG What You See Is What You Get  
TDMMDI The Devil Made Me Do It

And can it be that all this is really just TMI? Too Much Information?

I could go on. There seems to be an unending, ever-evolving list. We're now in such a hurry to do so many things and pack so much into even our briefest communiqués that acronyms can't help but enjoy great popularity. How else can you say so much and still be in such a hurry! I anticipate ways of increasing our acronymic proficiency; by, for example, signing up for the on-line teaching course I'm sure is on the way: Acronyms 101. How long will it be, I wonder, until you're walking down the street and you hear some young couple conversing in nothing BUT acronyms? The guy says to the girl: "TDMMDI," and she retorts: "IMHOWYSIWYG!" turns on her heel and storms away. Anything can happen.

At St. Matthew's we have our own acronym for ONE reason we're here today. Our first reason, of course, is to worship the Lord. Second, we honor all the saints of God who have gone before. Third, today is the day we traditionally launch our stewardship campaign for the upcoming year. Which makes today, among other things, Stewardship or (here's the acronym) EMC Sunday. EMC, of course, stands for Every Member Canvass, which harkens back to when members of our church fanned out after the ten o'clock service on this day to come knocking on the door of every St. Matthew's family asking them to pledge for the coming year.

We don't knock on doors anymore, for which some of you no doubt feel some sense of relief. Instead, we send letters of encouragement and reminder that it takes all of us contributing financially to keep our beloved church alive and healthy and active and viable as it is today. And stewardship is actually a better word than EMC. Because as Christians we know that all good things, all our blessings, come from God and that He in turn asks us to give back to Him, back to the work of His church, some portion of our worldly wealth. We are stewards of all we possess, not owners, because when we go we can't take it with us!

Yet we continue to call today EMC Sunday--because it works and because we're a people of acronyms. But I have a confession to make to you all today: EMC has another meaning for

me. As your rector and your friend, called by God and the vestry to preach this sermon today, EMC also means for me Every Minister's Conundrum. I take the definition of conundrum which says "a problem admitting of no satisfactory solution."

Why? Because preaching the stewardship sermon is every year the hardest sermon I preach. And that's because money, like our individual walks with God, is such a personal matter to every one of us. I don't want to offend. I don't want to sound grasping. I don't want to come on too strong. At the same time, of course, I want to preach a sermon that at the end has every one of you rushing up here to knock me flat in your eagerness to write huge, enormous checks to St. Matthew's and lay them here on the altar. There, you have it: this preacher's OTHER EMC.

So how do I get around my personal conundrum? How do I preach over and around and through the instinctive paralysis that threatens me every year on this particular Sunday? Here's how:

**By invoking yet ANOTHER acronym—an acronym the meaning of which frees me of anxiety and conundrum-hood and puts my feet on the path of happy preaching. And here it is: I call it CSM. And that stands for Celebrate St. Matthew's. And when I do that, when I celebrate St. Matthew's, I'm free at last! And that's because when I think of how much I love this church of ours, of WHY I love it, of what it means to celebrate all we cherish together here, then anxiety has no place. Joy rises to the surface and takes me over. And I am suddenly the happiest man you know, because I'm about to share with you today what I find worth celebrating in St. Matthew's.**

Of all the many things I celebrate in this place I love so much, I'm choosing just these few. They don't form an acronym, but they do share a common letter. The letter is C: and the C's go on one after another in a joyful recitation. Call them Five Cs of St. Matthew's. **The First C: Church.** When we think of St. Matthew's what do most of us think about? For starters, because we're physical people and because we find meaning and get our bearings from the concrete reality of things around us, we probably think first of this place. This church building. Of the other buildings that form the St. Matthew's compound. Of the extraordinary grounds and woods and physical beauty that make up the 67 acres of St. Matthew's properties.

But the reality of these buildings and these acres are more than the sum of their parts. You may walk in here today and see this as a beautiful old building, a superb example of Anglican Church architecture in the Federal period of our country. And so it is. But this building is more, far more than that. It is a repository of the spiritual experiences of the saints of God who have gathered here now for 199 years.

When I think of this building, I think of baptisms. I see a mother next door in the Vestry Room changing her infant into the tiny christening gown. I see the parents and God parents promising to raise this child to know God, to love God, to serve God. I see grandparents in the front row bursting with pride and joy at this landmark occasion in the new life of this child they love with a love beyond anything they imagined they could ever feel again. And I see with the eyes of the spirit God touching the water and turning just plain old tap water into miracle water so that when I or Susan of Danny baptizes that baby in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, God actually places a bit of His own Spirit WITHIN that child. And the

process of transformation begins in that moment, a process that will continue all the days of his or her life and never end, not even in heaven where the Prayer Book tells us we go from strength to strength in the life of perfect service . . . and life goes miraculously on in a way in which only our God could conceive.

And when I think of this church building, I see the groom nervously awaiting his bride back there in the Chapel, and I see the bride—how CAN every woman become the most beautiful woman in the world on her wedding day? I don't know, but time and again I see it happen. I see the bride getting out of the car, leaning on her proud father's arm; I hear Tony playing gorgeous organ music as the attendants sweep forward, the mothers dab eyes wet with emotion, and another miracle takes place. It's a miracle, because in these holy moments, in this holy old place, this bride and this groom make vows to love and cherish and honor each other. And because we pray for them and bless them and present them to God and the assembled company made up of the people who love them best in the world, God does a work of grace. A new creation springs into being, the forming of two individuals into the sacrament of a holy union, two become (as the Bible says) one flesh. And that's a miracle. And it has happened in these nearly 200 years over and over and over right here.

And when I think of this building I also see the tears and the grief-stricken faces. And I see the smiles *through* the tears as through all the years families and friends gather in this place to entrust their loved ones back to the Lord Who created and redeemed them and now opens His Father's arms to receive them back to Himself. Then we make the journey out of these doors into surely one of the loveliest resting places in America and maybe in the world, our Church Yard, and the ancient words sound again: "I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord, and whosoever liveth in Me shall never die." Words of comfort. Words of faith. Words of hope. Words of trust in the God who will never let us go.

And when I think of this building I see our children: little angels in halos and sparkly wings arrayed up these steps into the pulpit, friendly beasts, shepherds, kings and the baby Jesus who before you know it is an acolyte and having hands laid on by the bishop in confirmation. I see the little saints charging out this door on their way to Church School to learn that Jesus loves them; I see a little Holy Ghost herd headed for a special outdoor service in the Chapel in the Woods; and I see parents—and me—getting chocked up because the kids in the youth service do such a fabulous job of expressing the faith that will carry them through.

People can drive up and down Cantitoe Street. The cyclists can roar up Route 22 on a summer morning. And they can see this little brick church and think nothing about it. People who don't know anything about St. Matthew's can think this is just a building, just a collection of buildings and trees and tombstones, and they can say that's all there is to this place. But don't you believe them. Because they're wrong. This old building is NOT just another building, it's a holy building. And these are not just another set of pretty acres. These buildings, these acres, are dedicated to God. This is a place hallowed by the prayers and the praises and the tears and the laughter and the sorrow and the joy and the glorious experiences of a people joined to the living God and to each other as the people of St. Matthew's Church. This old building is NOT just another building, it's a holy building. When we gather here, as we're doing right now, it's made holy by the very presence here with us of the mighty God, Creator of the universe and Redeemer

of sinful humanity, Lover of your soul and of mine, the best friend you and I will ever have, the living Christ. Because He tells us: “Whenever you gather together in my name, I AM THERE WITH YOU.” Which means He’s here now. And you and I are on holy ground. In these moments the barriers between the physical world and the spiritual world fall down, and if we had eyes to see, you and I would see the air gold with the glory of God and we’d hear the sound of angels’ wings!

**Which brings me to the second C; Christ—which means Messiah, “the Anointed One.”**

Jesus is present with us today by His Spirit. He’s here for you, and He’s here for me. He’s here to receive our prayers. He’s here for us to give our burdens to. He’s here to lift our fears and our doubts and our frustrations. He’s here to strengthen us to get through the week ahead. He’s here to supply us with the things we need to live a successful life. He’s here to restore us and to lift us up and to give us victory day by day and every day of our lives.

And He’s here every time we’re here together. And we must not forget it. And we need to store that knowledge in the front part of our mind and write it on our heart, because then we’ll always remember that this is not just a gathering like any other gathering and this is not a building like any other building. It is the gathering of the saints of God to worship the living God in this place and to give His Spirit space in our lives. And that’s cause for celebration! There is no celebration like it! You have some ideas how happy I am when my team wins, but even that can’t hold a candle to the happiness I feel when the saints of God are gathered at the altar of God in the presence of God. Hallelujah!

**So we celebrate our church, and we celebrate our Lord today. We also celebrate this community, the St. Matthew’s family.**

When God designed the church, He didn’t have a building in mind. God’s definition of church isn’t buildings, it’s people. To Him, WE are the church, a company He called out of the world so that He could mould us as living bricks into a spiritual edifice in which He dwells by His Spirit. And God also had in mind for us to be a different kind of community from any other community. He wants us to be a group that reflect HIM in how we share our lives together, so that people will want to come and get to know God as we are getting to know Him here.

And I celebrate today the ways that St. Matthew’s lives out God’s vision for us. I celebrate how much fun we have when we get together for coffee hours or for clean ups or to serve on vestry, commission and committees. And I celebrate how hard you volunteers work, all you unsung heroes who are here this morning and many who are not, all of you who put in hours and hours of work keeping this church not only functioning but also growing and scaling new peaks for the Lord and His people. I celebrate the fun we have, the work we do, and the genuine love and caring we feel for each other. We are doing God’s work in this place.

And I celebrate the ways in which we are moving out--the ways in which we carry God’s love to the lost and hurt and broken of this world. To prisoners. To hungry. To lonely. To children and elderly and the homeless.

**I celebrate another C this morning. This C is our call, our call from God as the local parish church of St. Matthew's. What I'm talking about is the difference Jesus expects His church to make in the world.**

Our mission—you can read it here every Sunday--is to know Christ and to make Him known.

Though other churches don't necessarily put it quite as boldly or as simply and basically as we do, EVERY church is called to do exactly this.

I have a mentor for ministry whose understanding of our purpose coincides with mine. His name is Bill Hybels. He pastors one of the largest churches in the country. And a few years ago he was asked to describe his work to a management class at Harvard Business School. What he said was partly a response to a question posed by one of the Harvard students. The young man had asked Bill Hybels why he and his church leaders worked so hard making the church work.

“Doesn't church sort of just happen?” the guy asked.

These are Bill's words to that question. They could be my words, because it's how I feel. Hybels said:

“What you have to understand is that some of us church leaders believe to the core of our beings that the local church is the hope of the world. We really believe that. We believe that the church is the only God-anointed agency in society that stewards the transforming message of the love of Christ. We believe that the church addresses every human being's deepest need. We believe that the church can lead people into a whole new way of living and loving and serving, and can thereby transform society.

Hybels went on. He said: “You also need to realize that some of us church leaders live daily with the realization that the eternal destinies of people in our communities hang in the balance. That's why we are so determined to get our visions right and live out our values and come up with effective strategies. We truly believe that it matters that we attain our goals. It matters that we align our staffs and leverage our resources. We believe that the success or failure of our churches directly affects people's lives here today and for eternity. We believe this to our depths. We'd take bullets for it.”

And then he said, “That's why we make no apology for learning and applying best practice principles as God leads us in our churches. How could we do otherwise? The church is the hope of the world.”

I celebrate this call of God on our lives as the people of St. Matthew's, the call to show the world the hope they can only find in relationship with Jesus Christ.

**There you have it, four Cs: Church, Christ, Community and Call.**

**I leave with you one final C this morning. It is, not surprisingly, contribute.**

I pray you will contribute generously for the 2010 calendar year to the continuation of this God-inspired mission, this God-inspired cause of ours which brings hope to a torn and broken world and which brings joy and comfort and challenge to all of us who worship and work and pray and play together in this place. I pray that as you consider your opportunity to pledge to St. Matthew's you will do so, as I plan to do, from a heart filled both with gratitude and with the ongoing and personally renewing and enriching sense of CELEBRATION!