

Sermon for 6/9/19
Pentecost C
Farewell Sermon

In re-reading my first sermon at Trinity, I found this tidbit: “I need to remember that I don’t own the mantle that has been passed on; I’m just its current caretaker.” Today, I relinquish that mantle of leadership, giving it back to the wardens, the vestry, and the congregation who entrusted it to me 22 years ago. It has been a profound privilege to be your rector. I have tried, to the best of my ability, to preach the word of God, to minister to the congregation, to reach out with the love of Jesus Christ to the world around us, and to be faithful to my responsibilities. I am gratified by the good work that we have been able to accomplish together and I regret some of the opportunities that were missed. On the whole, I know that I have been blessed to have served Trinity Church in Fredericksburg.

One thing that has helped to guide me in my ministry is the realization that Trinity has been serving God for quite a long time. There were faithful people building this church for 120 years before I became rector and, with the grace of God, Trinity’s ministry will continue to bring the good news of Jesus Christ to people for many, many years to come. But you know, I don’t think that the founders of Trinity would recognize this congregation as being the church that they founded in 1877. There have been profound changes in worship, in church governance, in the ordained ministry, and the role of the laity in the past 142 years. And, if I’m correct, there will be profound changes in churches throughout the country in the years ahead.

Society has changed quite a bit in recent years in ways that directly affect the life of the Church. For example, active church members might only attend worship once a month, whereas in the past, active parishioners tended to join worship at least 3 out of 4 Sundays. The increasing economic divide between people affects giving patterns quite a bit, making it more difficult to fund the church. And, when we were once able to assume that most of the people in our communities were familiar with the basics of Christianity, that is no longer the case. Many commentators say that we have entered a post-Christian age in America.

We Christians have a choice: either be sure that our churches engage the world *as it is* in order to continue living into our mission of making disciples or just watch our beloved Church fade away into irrelevance. There really is only one choice: the Church needs to adapt to new realities in ways that will bring life and joy and faith to new generations. On this day of Pentecost, when we remember that the Holy Spirit first appeared to the apostles with the sound of a mighty wind, it is good for us to remember that sometimes that wind needs to blow out the old in order to make room for the new. The level of change that is needed won’t be simple to accomplish, but it is a task that the Church has met for the 2,000 years of its history.

Over the course of my ordained life I’ve learned is that while experience is very helpful, sometimes it can get in the way. I do believe that the time has come for me to step aside, to get out of the way, and to give space for new generations of leaders to bring their insights, their passions, their inspirations, and their faith to the life of the Church. While I will admit that I’m looking forward to not being in charge all the time – or at least pretending that I’m in charge all the time – a primary reason that I’m retiring is that I believe that Trinity is very likely to find a new rector who can lead it into the coming years better than I can.

For those of you unfamiliar with church transitions, you should know that once I leave Trinity, I really have to leave. While Joanne and I will probably stay in the Fredericksburg area for about a year before we’re ready to move, we won’t come back to Trinity to worship or to participate in various activities. That doesn’t mean that I don’t love you or that I don’t care about Trinity, it just means that I need to show that love and care by never interfering with your parish life in the future. It will be someone else’s turn to lead – first the interim and then the new rector. My continued presence would only get in the way. When it comes time to move on, sometimes the most loving thing a rector can do is truly to move on.

Since I announced my retirement, it’s been very gratifying to have so many parishioners tell me that my ministry has been important to them. Your love and your support have been the foundation for my ministry here.

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Yet it seems to me that rectors are just as likely to repel people as they are to attract them. While you may have found my approach to ministry helpful, I am aware of many people who have moved on to what they perceive as greener pastures. The reason that people stay in a congregation isn't because of the clergy, but because of the other members. It is the love that parishioners have for each other that makes the real difference, that turns people who just happen to sit in adjacent pews into becoming brothers and sisters in Christ. One of Trinity's great strengths, one of the things that makes this parish function, is the closeness and the affection that so many parishioners have for each other.

As I'm approaching the end of this sermon, there are a few details that I need to take care of. First of all, I need to apologize to Timothy for talking more about myself than about his baptism this morning. Timothy: there's an excellent chance that you may be the last person I'll ever baptize; my prayer for you is that you may know the love, the peace, and the joy of life with Jesus Christ throughout your days. In a few minutes you'll become the newest member of Trinity Church; I think you'll discover that this is a good place to grow in your faith.

Another detail: if you were OK with my sermon going on for another hour, then I would spend time thanking, by name, the many people who have supported me, guided me, and joined with me in ministry during my time at Trinity. They include wardens and vestry members, volunteers and staff, committee members and people who have shared their ideas with me. Even if I were to try to thank you all, I know that I would miss too many names, too many people who have made a difference. Please know that I do appreciate your support in whatever way you have offered it; it made it possible for me to serve as your rector for 22 years.

There is one person that I do need to thank, however: Joanne, my wife. Joanne has been my strong rock, my sounding board, my confidante, my best friend, my wisest critic, and my love, pretty much from the moment we met. Jo, thank you for your patience and understanding. Thank you for encouraging me when I needed it the most. And thank you for giving up something like 1,500 weekends for the 30 and ½ years of our marriage. I look forward to making it up to you for years to come.

I've heard some people say that I'm not much of a hugger since I don't often hug parishioners. That's not really true. Actually, I love to hug. It's just that, throughout my ministry, I wanted to be sure that I wasn't hugging for me, but for the other person. Since I know that there are people who don't like to hug, I didn't want to force them into an uncomfortable situation. And, I didn't want to seem to be playing favorites by hugging some people and not others. That ends today. My plan this morning is to give everyone a goodbye hug – and I'm doing it for me and not for you. If you don't want a hug, just stick out your hand and I'll gladly give you a goodbye handshake. But please know that, if you hesitate, you're getting hugged.

There's more that I want to say, but it's time to wrap up this sermon. I'm going to end it with a variation of the conclusion of my first sermon back in July of 1997. "May you work together joyfully, respecting the past and embracing whatever future it is that God has in store for you. May you continue to serve God together as faithful ministers of the Gospel."

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