

Installation of the Rev. Keri Aubert as Rector
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St. Thomas Episcopal Church
November 19, 2019

Trying It On

Habakkuk 2: 1-4; Psalm 126; John 20: 24-29

I want to start out tonight with a confession. I hate shopping. You know how it goes. Even before you head to the mall, you have to look deeply inside (which of course is really tough for most men), and decide what it is you really want – the look, the fabric, whether it slims you or not.

Then, if you're lucky, you spy the perfect garment, you fall in love – you try it on... only to find that the sleeves are too short, the shoulders too pinched, and your middle aged belly just won't stay where it's supposed to. Shopping's bad enough, but *trying it on* – that's where the rubber meets the road.

Trying it on is what our bishops suggest is the key to hearing the whisper of the Holy Spirit encouraging us to discover what God is up to – in our congregations, in our communities, in our beloved and fragile world.

Trying it on is how we raise our children. Seeing only through the glass darkly, we navigate all the twists and turns, doubts and discoveries. And as Keri and Jakki know so well, if we're really fortunate, the reward lies in a kind of "harvest time," like celebrating Morgan's emergence as an extraordinary young woman.

Trying it on is an essential stage in calling a Priest in Charge to an Episcopal parish. Just like shopping or childbirth, the process starts with exhilaration and great hopes, and progresses quickly to joyous victories, along with pinched shoulders, sleeves too short, and even sleepless nights. *Trying it on* in a parish means discerning whether God is calling us to live together as a faith community.

I'm not at all surprised at your answer to God's call, even if it's taken longer than any of us expected. You see, I've had the amazing privilege of knowing Keri and Jakki and Morgan for well over two decades. I could share many secrets, and embarrassing moments...

But suffice it to say that your new Rector is a woman of uncommon integrity and gifts for ministry, a person of humility and courage and vision, a passion for justice, and a cornucopia of resources for any congregation wise enough to call her.

Tonight we celebrate that Keri and the people of St. Thomas have said "Yes" – to growing together as a faith community, a church family. Having tried on this relationship, like an old married couple, you have worn down each other's rough spots, accepted each other's limitations and strengths, built up each other's gifts, and decided to walk the way of love, the shared leadership of God's people in this place.

You've made a sacred commitment to *abide* with each other, to grow together in love. And the only tools you have for this journey, are those that Jesus himself taught us.

We worry these days about church decline, but there's another side to that story. Many faith communities are vibrant and life – giving. If we examine these oases of hope and resurrection, regardless of denomination or faith tradition, we discover that they share several characteristics, that they've discovered four lessons on how to live and thrive in God's community.

What are these four lessons? The first is the most difficult: THEY LOVE. Not just like, or look up to, or lean on, or laugh with... , but love. They love regardless of similarity or difference, of whether they find each other annoying, of whether they are called over and over to forgive each other. As Jesus said, *"You shall know them by how they love one another."* The essential metric by which we evaluate every faith community, indeed every human relationship is how deeply and honestly they love.

And not just any love, but the particular kind of love St. Paul calls us to in his famous words in his first letter to the Christian community of Corinth. Listen carefully... because this is precisely the kind of love you have committed yourselves to in calling Keri to be your rector. Listen...

"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails."

My friends, loving, truly loving in this way, is the hardest work we will ever do. And it is also the most liberating and fruitful, if we hope to be of any use at all to God's people.

The second lesson of vibrant and life – giving faith communities is that THEY LISTEN – listening so deeply they're willing to be changed by what they hear; listening for that small still voice of God planted in us at birth and affirmed in our baptism; listening in spite of difference; listening with our hearts, and not just our heads. And listening in a way which demonstrates that we value being in right relationship, far more than we value being right. Only communities that master this kind of mutual listening can grow together into the healing love of God, and thus equip themselves to heal others.

The third lesson from life – giving communities is that THEY LEARN TOGETHER. As we love and listen, we can't help but learn a deeper and wider truth than we're able to imagine individually. It's why we Episcopalians call ourselves a broad church, where we need not agree, but where we commit to staying at the table, sharing our diverse truths, knowing this is the only way to discover those common, liberating truths that are worth bringing into a world hungry for meaning and hope.

The fourth and final lesson from vibrant communities, which flows directly from the first three – loving, listening and learning, is that THEY LEAD. Not as the world leads, but as servant leaders, following the way of Jesus, leading together. Leading by bringing the Good News of Jesus Christ into all of our relationships, here, into our communities, and into the wider world.

Frankly, this sounds like a lot of work! So why do we do this? Because to embrace the Christian life in this committed way, means receiving the riches of Jesus' promise in that beautiful passage in John's gospel, "*Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me... Abide in my love.*"

Congratulations, dear people of God, tonight the time of *trying it on* is over, and the season of *abiding* has begun! You have done your best to love each other, to listen to each other, to learn from each other, and to lead together, and in the process, you have equipped yourselves to be disciples and apostles of Jesus' Good News. God has looked upon your long and faithful service, and said, "*It is good. It is very good.*"

So go forward into the next chapter of your common life, with the light of God shining upon you, and may a clear and comforting awareness of God's presence and provision accompany you, every step of the way.