

September 15, 2019
The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost—Proper 19
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28
Psalm 14
1 Timothy 1:12-17
Luke 15:1-10

Last Sunday was Startup Sunday, our name for the Sunday we kick off the new program year. Because Bishop Laura Ahrens was here, things were different than usual. For one thing, I didn't preach, and so you didn't get my annual "inaugural address" for the program year. Making up for that, here we go.

I'll begin by observing that this is officially my first Sunday as your rector. The Vestry voted to make the call back in June, but it requires the execution of a new letter of agreement. That process was delayed by summer travel schedules, but it wrapped up last week.

The change in title is about more than semantics. In Episcopal Church governance, it's hard to fire a rector, and for that reason your leadership rightfully wanted to decide carefully. I suppose it's nice for me to have more job security, but that's not why I wanted to convert, and to do so as early as possible. The much more important consideration is that this parish is now no longer "in transition."

My predecessor celebrated his last Sunday at St. Thomas's nearly four years ago. Even in the comparatively slow-moving church world, we have been "in transition" for a long time. A lengthy transition is challenging for many reasons, some of which are generally true, and some of which are unique to our context.

Unique to our context is the Day School. If you come here only on Sundays, you might forget that we even have a School. But return here tomorrow morning at around eight o'clock, and it will feel like Brigadoon. Though it's not always obvious, the existences of Church and School are intricately intertwined. As the representative of the Church, the priest has a big impact on the life of the School. But the School is not a priest decider—it is merely subject to the Church's decision. School leadership is necessarily concerned with stability, and transitions hold uncertainty and therefore cause anxiety. In the Church-School constellation, my "transitional" status was in effect a reduced one, and this was good for neither Church nor School.

Let's turn to more particularly to the life of the Church. For the last four years, your parish leadership has spent much of its time and energy on tasks assigned by the Diocese. For example, we did not one but two rounds of congregational goal-setting; we developed structures and systems for being in community with one another. It was good and important work, but I'm glad we can move on. With my call as rector, we have returned to a much greater degree of congregational autonomy. With that congregational autonomy, it's up to us to figure out what's next. It won't be handed to us. What's next? It's a question that I hope each of you will spend some time with.

I can say a little about what it means for me. Most of you know by now that I believe that relationships outside these walls are important. This is one of the ways in which my leadership is very different from my predecessor's. It's why I began networking with local clergy soon after my arrival. But I pulled way back on that last year, when the transition was further extended, because transition tasks were taking more time, and those relationships would be pointless if I left. Now, knowing I'll be here for a while, I'm reengaging. To be clear, that reengagement is related to the work of the Parish.

Last Sunday during coffee hour, Bishop Laura took questions. I can't remember exactly how it was phrased, but one question had to do with the health of Episcopal churches in the Diocese. Bishop Laura acknowledged that churches across the Diocese are losing members and money. When asked what's being done in response, she talked about churches moving beyond their sanctuaries to join in the good work that God is already doing in their neighborhoods. She continued that subject later with the Vestry. We had prepared for the meeting by watching a TED talk by a Lutheran pastor-in-training.¹ In a sentence, it's about socio-cultural shift and how the church of today is different from the church of her grandfather. I put a link to that video on the Church Facebook page.

Here at St. Thomas's, over the last four years, people have come, and people have gone. Each departure was painful for me and for many of you. The net result has been a continuation of the decline in attendance and income that was already in progress when I arrived. Some left specifically because of me, and I truly regret that. Still, and while I had hoped to avoid it, this is typical of what happens in a church upon the departure of a pastor of thirty-plus years. Weighing it all, the Vestry and I discerned that God was calling us to continue on the path we have been forging together. And so here we are, kicking off the next phase of this parish's life. We are returned to congregational autonomy, but the question remains: What's next?

This is a very different congregation that it was four years ago; it's also very much the same congregation that it was four years ago. I'm still excited about being here, and for the very same reasons. To name a few: This congregation is unlike any other Episcopal church in New Haven or even in Connecticut. We are uniquely positioned, geographically and demographically. Our beautiful worship is upheld by a wonderful music program—which, if last Sunday was any indication, is better than ever. We have a history of being a prophetic voice of radical welcome and inclusion. The Day School is a long-term partner with whom we have long been doing God's work in the neighborhood. All in all, we are so very fortunate to have such a strong foundation upon which to stand.

By the Episcopal Church's definition of the term, this parish is no longer "in transition." Still, as you know, at this historical moment, every institution is in transition; therefore, every human being is in transition. If that feels overwhelming, remember that we are in company with people around the globe and for all of human history. Sure, for a couple of decades after World War II, things were pretty good in America—but not for everyone and not for all creation. Operating within and contributing to that culture of denial, the white Protestant church flourished, for a while, and then we denied our own decline. It's all over now, and we know it. It's long overdue, but here we are—if not *in transition*, then *in change*.

That's daunting, but it's really not all doom and gloom. In fact, it might actually be *good news*. Today's Gospel reading offered the parables of the sheep and the coin, which of course aren't about sheep or coin. God is gathering all things to Godself, even those things that were lost, and rejoicing. Hey, it's God we're talking about here, so those things must have only *seemed* to be lost. Maybe, just maybe, the church has been a bit lost, and God is gathering it up, too.

I feel pretty sure that Jesus didn't come to create a monolithic and unchangeable institutional bureaucracy; Jesus came to redeem the world, by being God among us and inviting us to God's party. When I really think about it, there is a lot about the old church ways that even my old self finds tiresome. Maybe, just maybe, God is calling the church to a season of renewal, which we are blessed to be a part of. That is something to celebrate.

We engage *out there* because we celebrate *in here*. Look around. Gosh, what an assortment of amazing human beings! One by one, God found us, laid us on her shoulders, rejoiced, and carried us here. A flock of foundlings, God is shepherding us as we find our way together. From this firm foundation, we can step into the future, not in fear, but in faith.

Notes

¹ Bethany Ringdall, "Insights for the New Reformation," a TEDx Talk, April 10, 2017, available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q-9G-IJTGA0> (accessed September 14, 2019).