

Returning Home
Sermon, August 14, 2022
The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

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So, there's a lot to unpack in the lectionary lessons for today, but I'm going to leave that for the next time it comes up in the lectionary.

Today, I want to look back to late summer, early fall of 1985, just about this time of year, I think. It was a pivotal time in my life, a time when I felt drawn into this particular body of Christians; a feeling that was so powerful that it has stayed with me until now, almost 37 years later.

Over the years of my priesthood, I've preached about my Episcopal beginnings here at St. Mary's many times, usually involving tears with gratitude. So, when Michael asked me to preach today, he wondered if I might share some of my story – a story in which some of you likely played a part.

I had just moved from Valdez with my two babies in August of 1985. Stephanie had just turned one, and Michael was three. I had very few financial resources, only a few friends here in Anchorage, and was beginning a new job. "Overwhelmed" was an understatement.

I had never been in an Episcopal church before and came to St. Mary's as the result of an invitation from my friend Gwen, a member here then. I didn't know what to expect. I had never heard of an Episcopalian. I hadn't been a part of a worshipping community since I was twelve years old and baptized into the Church of the Brethren.

If I close my eyes, though, I can remember that first day. I entered the doors of the old church – now the chapel – it was the first time I had ever opened a Book of Common Prayer, I remember being welcomed by Chuck Eddy, and so many who were in church that day, but what I most remember is feeling like I had come home.

In 1986, I took the classes to be confirmed as an Episcopalian, and I remember that day. It was a big deal. My sponsor stood up and introduced me to the congregation formally, talked a little bit about me and my family. The knave was packed. And every confirmand was welcomed that same way, and people clapped, and the bishop laid his hands on us, and I felt, when he did that, like I had become one of you. What a day.

As we get to know each other better, you'll learn that I'm most passionate about radical hospitality, and feeding ministries, and leading, as best as I can, in my humanity, with kindness and peace and justice. Those values were clearly in the DNA of St. Mary's, and they made a deep impression on my heart, a lasting mark on my soul.

The memory that always still makes me weep, though, occurred during the Advent season of that year. When I walked into the small Narthex one Sunday morning and, for the first time, learned about the ministry of Advent gifts, and among those wrapped gifts on the table that day were some for my children.

I was so surprised, I hadn't heard of this, and so grateful as I opened those presents with my kids. I can still close my eyes and see that purple snowsuit for Stephanie. It was much more than I could have afforded. And I can still see that navy down winter coat for Michael, again, so much more than I could have provided, but it was exactly what we needed.

I don't know who left those gifts for them, but I will never forget that random act of kindness for a single mom and her kids.

You know, it was here, as time went on, that I first felt the nudging to follow a path towards ordination. And with that firm foundation of what a Christian worshipping community could be, I moved outside to go to college, got a master's degree in social work, continued raising my children, and ended up in Topeka, Kansas, where I was ordained a deacon in 1997, and then went to seminary and was ordained a priest in 2007.

It's been a journey of faith, but always undergirded by the love and welcome I first felt here. Always, in the back of my mind, I've had the intention to respond to people with whom I journey with the same attitude of radical hospitality, welcoming, and nurture, that I first experienced when I walked through the door in St. Mary's.

I went on to serve churches in Kansas, North Carolina, and "just up the road" in Fairbanks, and I dare say, that if you ask me what values I try to live into with those congregations, you will recognize them, because you live them too.

In the Gospel lesson, we hear about division. At its base, Jesus' message is that we must be watchful of being divided from the God who created us. The lessons that Jesus taught in his earthly ministry that sin is separation from God, and that unity is a rejection of sin and living into the promises that we all take in our baptism and reaffirm when we're confirmed.

You know, it's all about relationships. I hope you hear that in my story. It's all about relationships. The relationships we have with each other, perfecting as best we can, the relationships that form our values and can transform our lives, so that we can live into the dreams that God holds out for God's people.

Recognizing that along our way, we may be the only bible anyone ever reads. How we live our life, the words we say or don't say, the actions we take or don't take, that is the only bible some people ever read.

What we make clear about our values, when we offer a bit of hospitality, or a downy purple snowsuit, or a simple sip of nurture, to those who simply want to know they matter, to simply want to be shown a bit of respect and dignity as they make their way along the roads of this, our island home. Those are the things that last.

Steven Charleston was a bishop here for a while, and he's still a really wise writer. He always said, live to leave what lasts, and it's those values that I first saw here, that last. It's not our houses, it's not our boats, maybe it's not even a purple snowsuit, but it is kindness, and it is love, and it is justice, and it is offering dignity to those who wander with us. Those are the things that last.

It's with deep gratitude that I've joined you again, knowing that that sign out front, that I looked at again today as I walked in, proclaiming, "Welcome Home!" is a cornerstone of the ministry that proceeds from this place; a symbol of the unity that extends from generation to generation to generation. I am grateful.

I want to turn for just a few minutes from talking about my journey and talk about a man about whom I've preached every year since my ordination, on or near his feast day in our tradition. That day is August 14, today, and that man is Jonathan Myrick Daniels. I think that hearing the stories of people of faithful courage are increasingly important in a time when we need, as much as anything, exemplars who are willing to stand up and act out of their integrity.

I talk about Jonathan Myrick Daniels, to remind myself and to remind you, of what one person did as a matter of conscience, with eyes wide open, a faith that was alive, and all of that fueled by the love of Jesus Christ.

I talk about Jonathan to remind us of the lasting impact that one life can have, to honor that this 26-year-old man made a decision to do, in what turned out to be the last year of his life, what was right. What he felt compelled to do as a beloved child of God; to live out the gospel of Jesus Christ as he understood it from his own study of scripture.

Jonathan, having taken a leave of absence from his seminary studies, went to Selma, Alabama to join in the fight for voting rights for all, and on August 14, 1965, Jonathan and some of his companions were jailed for taking part in a picket line. Released six days later, they walked to a small store where they had shopped before without any trouble. Jonathan was with a group of three others, including Ruby Sales, a 16-year-old black teenager who led the group as they walked up the steps to the store.

On that day, Ruby was met at the doorway by Thomas Coleman, an unemployed highway worker armed with a shotgun, who cursed her. Jonathan acted quickly, instinctively, and pulled Ruby to one side to shield her from the unexpected threat, and at that moment, Jonathan was killed, as the trigger on that shotgun was pulled.

In his book, "Brightest and Best," Sam Pataro wrote that the man who threatened Ruby Sales that day, and then killed Jonathan, had been taught to fear and hate those who differed from him, and Pataro goes on to say that Jonathan, on the other hand, nourished by holy scripture and the sacraments, encouraged by the example of the cloud of faithful witnesses about whom we read in holy scripture, had learned and lived faith, hope, and love.

We're called every day to make decisions, both large and small, the result of which show clearly what we hold up as our values. And while we're not likely to be called to make the kind of decision that Jonathan did, we're still called to discern what we can do to spread the good news of the Gospel, either individually or corporately, as members of a worshipping community, and followers of Jesus the Christ.

In the quiet of morning, or in the shadows of nightfall, I wonder what we hear whispered about who we are, who we're called to be, and what God's dreams are for us in this time and place. I wonder how we do show our faith to a wounded and worried world. I wonder.

And I believe that the answer is unique to each of us, according to the gifts and graces we've been given.

I am excited, my friends, to see how we will continue to live into the call to care for the poor, or those without a safe place to live, or the marginalized, knowing that it will be a part of the legacy that we leave for those who follow us.

But most of all, my friends, I hope you feel now, and carry with you always, the love of the God who created you, and delights in your good works, and loves you until all of eternity.

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace.

And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets-- who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented-- of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Luke 12:49-56

Jesus said, "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided:

father against son
and son against father,

mother against daughter
and daughter against mother,

mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law
and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

He also said to the crowds, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, 'It is going to rain'; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat'; and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?"