

St. John's Lutheran, Albany
24 April 2016

5 Easter – C
Acts 11:1-18
Revelation 21:1-6
John 13:31-15

The text for the sermon is from the second lesson: *“See, the home of God is among mortals and God will dwell with them and they will be God’s people.”*

I have a colleague who told his congregation during Lent, “I’m not going to do an Easter Vigil this year unless there will be a baptism to do.” I got his point: in the early church, it was at the Easter Vigil that new Christians—and these were generally adults—were baptized after a period of instruction in the faith. Even today, it’s the tradition to have baptisms at our Easter Vigils. That’s part of the reason that I like to do the rite of asperges—you know, those droplets of water that I sprinkle from a green branch as I move among congregational members. I like to do that at the Easter Vigil to remind us that in the waters of baptism we are washed and claimed as God’s own son or daughter and joined in the body of Christ.

Now the colleague I’m talking about is a really good guy—you all know him—and I’m sure he would have done the Easter Vigil whether or not there was somebody to baptize. But this year he did get his wish; there was indeed a baby baptized at the Vigil and that’s how the Easter season opened over at Holy Spirit.

But really, every baptism is a little Easter, and today we celebrate with Carla, Michael and Lucien as their little daughter and sister, Olivia Joy joins the body of Christ here at St. John’s. Every baptism is a little Easter, an affirmation of life over death, a living witness to the triumph of grace over brokenness.

Now I have to admit that, after last week away from you, I’m really happy to be back here in the St. John’s pulpit. Because so much has happened in our church life recently and we need to be together to process some of this. We really do. Luther had a phrase for that. He called it “the mutual conversation and consolation of the brethren.” (And I would, “the sistern.”) We need that mutual conversation and consolation, particularly as we move forward into this changed church landscape.

As you all know, just a little over two weeks ago, the Council of St. John’s voted to withdraw from the consolidation or merger process with the congregation at First. And this past Friday, the people of First were given word of Pastor Allie’s coming resignation in May, a decision that predated and was unrelated to the decision made by the St. John’s Council on April 5th.

All of a sudden the path we thought we were on, the path to a merger with First and the possible future pastoral leadership of Pr. Allie has radically changed. And so it's easy to feel as though all the balls have been thrown up in the air. What's going to happen next? What will we do?

We all know that change is hard. Unexpected change is even harder.

Do you remember the old Mattel toy, the Magic 8 Ball? I used to love my Magic 8 Ball. In case, you don't remember it, it was a black ball, just smaller than a bowling ball and it was used as a fortune telling tool. You asked it a question, turned the ball over and in the little screen on the bottom of it, one of twenty possible answers would appear. It might say "it is decidedly so" or "outlook good" or "you may rely on it" which were always heartening responses to questions such as "Does Billy Turgeon have a crush on me" or "Will Mom let me get my ears pierced at Denby's next Saturday?" But then there were a few troubling answers I didn't want to see. Sometimes the Magic 8 Ball said, "Cannot predict now" or "Concentrate and ask later." Or there was my least favorite response which was "Reply hazy, try again."

Well, guess what? As the body of Christ gathered faithfully here at St. John's, we are in the "Reply hazy, try again" phase of life when it comes to our future and our mission. We are in the "cannot predict now" stage, the "concentrate and ask later" period. And I want to share some very candid thoughts with you in the hope that they can not only be of some comfort, but also of some use and perhaps even some inspiration. You may not like my ideas, but I've been an ordained pastor for twenty-three years, so I'm pretty seasoned by now. And if I know anything, it's that we need always, to trust the Holy Spirit and to be both as smartly creative and completely realistic as we can be. *Trust the Holy Spirit and be smartly creative and completely realistic.* Let's take that as our *modus operandi*. Let's let that be our working method.

So here's a fact: Every congregation has a life-cycle. And all kinds of demographic factors affect how that life-cycle is shaped. But when a congregation is beginning to decline in membership, when members feel stressed and overworked, when "burn-out" begins to threaten because the congregation is still trying to do all the mission work and activities it did before when it had a larger membership, that's a really, really critical period. That's the time to really pause and take stock. Because one of two things can happen then:

The first thing is that the congregation continues its decline until—no surprise here—it needs to shut its doors. The second—and I'm sorry to say, this is a more rare thing—the congregation finds a way to radically re-invent itself.

Now—understand that with or without the congregation of First in partnership with St. John's, we are at this critical point. Yes, it *is* a scary point. But if we trust the Holy Spirit and are smartly creative and completely realistic—remember, that's our *modus operandi*--then it can also be a *very, very* creative

point. And to be honest, it may actually be easier for St. John's on its own to discern a vision than to try to do that while in the midst of an unwieldy and potential troubling merger or consolidation—which was why the Council reached the decision it did on the April 5th.

Now truthfully, I'm mostly certain that God is not calling us to keep the doors open at St. John's just because we love the building or because our kids were baptized here or because it's close to where we live. Rather, I think God is less concerned about the building of St. John's and more about the people who are in it. And so we have the opportunity now to ask ourselves: what are the people of St. John's going to do that will most benefit the spread of the gospel of God's love?

Remember how I said that "Trust the Holy Spirit and be smartly creative and completely realistic" is our *modus operandi*? Well then, *What are the people of St. John's going to do that will most benefit the spread of the gospel of God's love?* needs to be our guiding premise. It's the first and most important question to ask and to ask again and again and again and again.

So let me give you some examples of things we can brainstorm about in the weeks and months ahead. If you don't like any of these ideas, don't shoot the messenger. Instead, just remember the guiding premise: *What are the people of St. John's going to do that will most benefit the spread of the gospel of God's love?*

Ground yourself in that question before you quarrel with any proposals that may try to answer it. And remember our *modus operandi*: "Trust the Holy Spirit and be smartly creative and completely realistic."

So, to begin: a few weeks ago, ELCA Mission Investment Fund Church Building Consultant Jeff Spann had a conference call with the building workgroup when First and St. John's were still talking about consolidation. One of his suggestions was that we try to sell both buildings, do some demographic studies and potentially rent or buy worship space in an area where there is an actual potential for growth—and honestly, that's not right here where we are.

The Rev. Norma Malfatti, Director for Evangelical Mission in our Synod, met with Pastors Allie and Dave Preisinger and me several weeks ago. She handed out fourteen different maps of the one-and-a-half mile radius around all the three congregations of First, St. John's and Holy Spirit. The prospect for outreach to the areas surrounding St. John's and First? Not good. Not good at all. So honestly when it comes to answering the question *What are the people of St. John's going to do that will most benefit the spread of the gospel of God's love?*, staying put is maybe not a very good option.

Well, we don't like the idea of not staying put. Of course we don't! We love it here. And look at Rensselaer and Columbia counties! They've got thirteen Lutheran churches with open doors. So what if we're a declining congregation. Nobody is closing up shop across the river! Why should we?

Okay, well, yes, look at Rensselaer and Columbia counties with their thirteen churches. There are two *part-time* pastors in Columbia County. There is an intentional interim pastor in Rensselaer County. All those churches are served on a kind of fill-in basis by Conference Deacons and supply pastors for Sunday morning worship. The last called pastor who served Trinity, Castleton had to be let go because there was no longer enough money to pay her salary. The part-time pastor—seminary trained for four years, as each of us are—at Christ our Emmanuel augments his salary by working at Target; he lives rent-free at the Quaker Retreat in Chatham in exchange for acting as a kind of housekeeper. Honestly, all of that is unacceptable. Now, I'm not saying there are not good people in these churches nor am I saying that there are not faith-filled people who worship with loving hearts. But is this truly the best way to witness to the gospel of Christ? Is this truly fair to call a pastor who can't be paid or to limp along without any pastoral leadership at all? Loving a building is not the same as loving God. Sorry, but that's the truth.

I don't want to see St. John's follow in the footsteps of declining congregations who use up their financial resources in order to maintain that status quo. Staying open, but slowly declining, as we are, is not the way to go long-term. But do I think that the people of St. John's have the potential for mission? Yes, I do. Only it may look different than it does now. It may not happen here in this building. It may not even happen as a discreet, "St. John's." But our identity as a congregation pales beside our identity as daughters and sons of God, claimed in our baptisms and joined to the body of Christ.

In the coming months, as we craft our Mission Site Proposal, the document that paves the way for the potential calling of another pastor—perhaps a part-time pastor, with a focus perhaps on a radical change in how we will do our ministry—let us be open minded and curious. Let us be guided by our *modus operandi* so that we can "Trust the Holy Spirit and be smartly creative and completely realistic."

And let us prayerfully ask and be open to hearing answers to this guiding premise: *What are the people of St. John's going to do that will most benefit the spread of the gospel of God's love?*

And I am confident that the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.