**St. Aidan’s Episcopal Church**

**The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost**

**Final Sermon**

**Jeremiah 1:4-10**

**Psalm 111**

**2 Corinthians 5:14-18**

**Luke 1:46-55**

**John 20:11-18**

**Begin Where You Are**

How do any of us really know when the last time comes for any activity we experience in any part of our lives. We can all recall when we used to do something and thought we would be doing it for life, but somehow it just faded away. For instance, the last time I ice skated, I thought I would be ice skating for years. Then life intruded and, somehow the ice skates ended up hanging forgotten in the closet, moving steadily further and further back behind the dress shoes for the office, and the hiking boots, until at some point, they disappeared altogether, maybe during some moving day from one home to another. I did find my skating skirts, still lovingly packed away, waiting patiently for my use, but when we looked at each other and assessed each other’s size, we all knew our time together was long gone. Even in the midst of our dreaming, we do have to face realities.

I like to think that the skates and, by now, the skating skirt are back out on the ice and that someone else wore them after me and they wore them well. I like to think that new life that exists for all creation, that nothing God has made is ever designed to stay in one place, and that all that has gone before as we move on, is made better in its renewed life and existence.

We move on to add the experience we are leaving to the experience that awaits. We take the experience with us, even as we leave behind a part of ourselves, our accomplishments and our failed experiments, for others to remember or to learn from. For God, nothing is wasted that is entered into in God’s name. All that was created is never completed, but continues to emerge in new ways to the extent that whatever it was that was beautiful about it before holds the potential to become even more beautiful as it progresses into the future that unfolds before it.

All that is required of God’s people for this to happen in any part of our individual or communal lives; is faith in God’s creative hand, faith in the teaching of Jesus Christ, and faith in the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

 When we come to significant days in our lives and find the need to turn to the scriptures through which we can try to understand guidance for our lives, we find that the choosing of the right scripture to be almost an impossible task. We all have favorite passages, favorite Gospel readings, Old Testament prophets, favorite parables and the like. The only way we can choose is to think about what we most want to say.

Thus, the readings I have chosen for this final opportunity to speak to you in this way, is to return, as I so often do, to the knowledge of God’s continual renewal and re-creation of all that God’s and God’s desire for us all to be a part of that new creation. To return to Jesus’ teaching of the most important of all God’s commandments which call us to love of God with all our heart, mind and soul and to love our neighbor ourselves. To return, always, to reconciling love of Christ. These have comprised the core of my preaching and practice at St. Aidan’s and will remain so for as long as I am called to speak.

The Prophet Jeremiah was called by God to preach to the people of Israel during some tough times. And thinking about Jeremiah’s challenges, I could not help but think of our years of challenge with COVID-19, its aftermath, and our still, slow journey back from its life-altering effect.

 Jeremiah felt ill-equipped to speak out but yet he was compelled to answer the call. God speaks directly to him, compelling him to speak out God’s message to God’s people in Jeremiah’s own tine. God doesn’t tell Jeremiah what to say, but God does want Jeremiah to speak on God’s behalf. It became a significant passage for me during our challenges to keep on during the pandemic, and I resolved that nothing would change, nothing would disappear due to that challenge. I felt God’s call to continue to speak on behalf of God and to continue to teach God’s word. Thus, we continued to read the scriptures carefully, examining every word and verse in order to discover not just what the words mean, but rather “What is God calling us to do.”

Throughout my preaching and teaching at St. Aidan’s, I have continually returned to that question for myself and for you. What is God calling you to do with the gifts God has given you in your life? What is God calling you be and to become? We are where we find ourselves, each one, and we can begin where we are in order to move forward into participating in God’s new creation. We must pray about God’s call to each of us. We must pray fervently and with less thought of ourselves and with more thought for God’s purpose for us in the world. We pray for the strength to keep walking in the way of God, fulfilling God’s will for us. We find ways to come together for mutual support as we make our way forward, deepening our faith with the aid of the Saints, such as Aidan, Benedict, Cuthbert, all the Mary’s, Martha, Naomi and Ruth. Each has lessons to teach us and we are called to learn, even though it is not always easy to stay the course.

St. Paul reminds us that it is through Christ that we find the strength to keep on keeping on. It is through faith in his message of love for God’s people that we begin to understand the meaning of a new creation. We who call ourselves followers of Christ, we Christians, understand that we live not just for ourselves, but for God who came among us in human form, who lived among us, and who died for us and was resurrected to return to his divine existence. We saw, we learned and for 2,000 years we have walked, and walk, in the footsteps of millions gone before, leaving our footprints for millions to come after. We are servants of the Lord, here to do God’s will and to work for God’s kingdom.

We learn that what is past is past, and all that was has been made new, and will be made new, in Christ. All that was then is now recreated and will continue to be created. All the mistakes, all the resentments, all the judgments, all the sorrow and all the regrets are left behind through love of Christ and Christ’s love for God’s people. And it is never to late for us to drop the heavy load of the past in order to continue our journey with a far lighter step. As we go, we find others who share the same desire to love God and neighbor.

At St. Aidan’s, we have been first hand witnesses to the divine hand of the Holy Spirit responding to our desire to love God and our neighbor. We have searched for solutions to attract families. We have searched for solutions on how to offer the arts to marginalized children who might have little or no access to the arts. We have searched for a signature identity, a way to express ourselves to our church and to the community which surrounds us. We have searched for ways to lift hearts and souls through music, poetry, meditation and prayer.

The Spirit has responded in ways we could never imagine.

We are growing a community of faith by welcoming congregations of varying and diverse cultures and traditions who want to be part of such a community. We began by working with the Spanish congregation of Holy Cross, fellow Episcopalians, and Jesus es la Camino, a non-denominational Spanish ministry. We learned some lessons about what can work and what cannot work through those partnerships. Kingdom Harvest, a Pentecost Liberian ministry joined us, as well. Then came our Russian friends, along with their many Ukrainian connections to add to the growing richness of our identity as a place of diversity. Our Russian seniors served by Eastside Daycare Ministries have given us such pleasure, as we hear them singing Russian hymns inside Murdock Hall and outside in the courtyard. I shall never forget how amusing it was to watch a few of our elderly Russian men scratching their heads as the labyrinth began to emerge with its concentric rings which were set before the entry path was added. It was wonderful to watch the commiserations. One didn’t need to speak Russian to understand the body language. Our new brothers and sisters in Christ of St. Antonnius Egyptian Coptic Orthodox Church have arrived, bringing with them families and children. And now, we are welcoming a new non-denominational ministry called Kingdom Citizen, a house church planting with its roots in Micronesia and Guam, which, through the deeply passionate faith of its Pastor, Wilson Deitas is destined to grow.

When I first arrived at St. Aidan’s we began to pray for our lives. Our families and children grown and gone, there was great anxiety about the life of St. Aidan’s. Would we survive. I remember the parting words of John Kater, one of my seminary professors who, when asked how we would know where and how God would want us to minister, and how we would know if we were answering God’s call, Prof. Kater said, smiling, “Prepare to be surprised.”

We have been surprised. But we have learned that God works through us in ways we never expected, not just because we sit and wait, but because we set about working for change and, all along, the Holy Spirit has been working with us to build a community of faith that is filled with families and children. They don’t look or sound like the families and children fifty years ago, but they bring the gift of love and delight in finding a welcoming faith family in which to grow.

As a community of faith, comprised of diverse representatives of the community in which we are located, St. Aidan’s is poised to emerge as a church of the future: diverse, busy, growing and filled with opportunity for mutual love of God and neighbor. In the words of Fred Buechner, whom I’ve quoted many times before, “The place God calls you to is the place **where your** deep gladness and the **world's** deep hunger **meet**.'

The world is hungering for reconciliation and peace between people. It longs for love rather than hate, for understanding rather than judgement and St. Aidan’s is at the edge of ministering to that longing and need.

Our ministry of reconciliation, of truth and love is now ours, freely given by our Lord Jesus Christ. It has been given to us to share. As St. Paul says, and through all the difficulties, challenges, hardships, worry and anxiety, see, we are alive! Moving from a possibility of despair into joyous anticipation of the future, leaves us only one response “Thanks be to God!”

Perhaps that is why I love this famous passage from John’s story of Mary Magdalene’s discovery at the empty tomb. She is moved from despair to hope to joy. From human loss to joyful gratitude. From misunderstanding to infinite insight and happy acceptance.

It is a story of persistence and dedication. Mary didn’t simply go home after the crucifixion of Jesus, she went back to the tomb. She could not leave Jesus, the teacher she loved, even if it meant she could only come to sit near the place they had laid him. When she found tomb empty, she did not run in fear when confronted by messengers of God, but immediately asked where she would find Jesus. She asked anyone who came by, especially the one who could have been a gardener. What has always captivated me was her absolute recognition and acceptance when Jesus simply said her name, “Mary.”

She did not say this isn’t possible. No arguing with skepticism, no doubts, no questioning or cross-examination. If I could choose a friend from this part of life I would choose Mary Magdalene. Straightforward, dedicated, courageous, quick-witted and faithful. Our first Apostle. My heroine, who I like to think, was able to make Jesus laugh. She was known and recognized by Jesus, just as we are known and recognized by Jesus. Mary teaches us to be aware of when Jesus is standing in front of us and not to ignore the opportunity to recognize him.

These are the core themes of our faith, entwined with our tradition, our scripture, our theology and our experience, to which I have endeavored to adhere. A call to serve, a call to love, a call to accept in fearless faith, God, Son and Holy Spirit, One God, the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. When I prayed about what I was to say today, God said to me, “Say what I called you to say in the beginning.” Notice God did not say, I could talk about sheep. Maybe next week.

In thinking about God’s call, I have done a little calculating which I’ll share with you. Since third Advent, 2015, I have offered this pulpit to visiting priests eight times, while I was away from the church. Two of those were when I left for Scotland with my family as we all attended the wedding of my youngest son, Geoff and Shasta. I preached and Father Stephen officiated. I also took along a group picture of our congregation, and you all travelled with me from church to cathedral, and as you may recall, we saw some of the resulting pictures of yourselves gracing those locations. A good time was had by all.

After about 330 sermons from this pulpit, and the same number of extemporaneous homilies from the nave during Thursday morning Eucharists or for women’s retreats, and just under two hundred homilies during Evening Prayer on Wednesday evenings, God and this church have given me approximately 860 opportunities to teach God’s central message of love and reconciliation. For just under two and half years you patiently sat through sermons on Zoom and endured my many attempts to bring music into our services through some technological means or another. I thank John Gurney for all his support and assistance during that time, especially when panic set in at 9:59 am on Sunday mornings when I might have been heard muttering things like, “I didn’t go to seminary to learn how to run this thing,” and the like. If I add these to sermons, homilies, teachings during my call to Grace Memorial, I am amazed to see more than a thousand.

When I began my first class in Homiletics at seminary, my professor asked each one of us how many times we had preached. I shrank as I heard numbers like 25, 50 or even 100. My turn came and I told the truth. I had preached but one time, and that was at Trinity Cathedral as a first year seminarian, lifted up by that church. When I began to speak, the bishop walked in. So that counts for 10!

Since then, throughout all those sermons and homilies, retreats, workshops, classes and Catechumenates, I have preached on the themes I have outlined today, for each of us personally, and for our faith community at St. Aidan’s. In every moment we are to assess what must be let go, and what might be taken up. We are not to fear failure, for it is out of failure that we learn how to succeed. Thus, my question remains the same.

What is God calling St. Aidan’s to do now with the gifts that have been given to her and what is God calling St. Aidan’s to become?

My prayer for St. Aidan’s is that, if you do nothing else, dance with God into the future. Laugh and play, work and pray, but for God’s sake dance with love of God and love of neighbor, starting now, wherever you are, or whatever your life circumstances might be. Begin where you are, no matter past missteps or regrets, no matter how rough the road has been, or looks to be ahead. Like Jeremiah, answer the call, like Paul, keep the faith, and like Mary, never give up. Keep walking the path of faith, you will never walk alone, and will never disappoint.

It has been my distinct privilege to serve you in this beautiful parish of St. Aidan. I pray I have pleased the spirit of Aidan and Lindisfarne. I pray I have pleased God in all I have done and left undone, all I have hoped to accomplish to the glory of God and for the souls of the people of this church.

I thank God for calling me to use the skills God gave me, and I thank you for trusting God enough to accept them.

I have grown to love you and will always keep you in my prayers, even as we journey on in our separate ways. We will each continue to make our earthly journey in with different dreams and visions, but in the Kingdom of God, we will always be walking on the same path.

Amen.

Written to the Glory of God as my final sermon at St. Aidan’s Episcopal Church

E. J. R. Culver+

August 15, 2022