

23rd Sunday after Pentecost
Ps. 84
Stephen Edmondson

The Sparrow has found a home...

My dad has been a leader in a variety of churches to which he's belonged in the past years; he's often had occasion in his leadership to push folks to think about who they are as a church. He asks them whose church it is? He leads them past old answers, that the Church is the bishop's, since we are the Episcopal Church. Nor is the church the priest's. That's not why you're here, not for my sake. But he also pushes them past the most comfortable answer, that the Church is theirs—the people's. The Church, my dad, explains, belongs to God, and we have the Church as God's gift. Until the recent unpleasantness, I had never heard my dad's question in a legal context—I've always heard it in relation to stewardship—what it means that we are stewards of this community as a gift from God.

We need to recognize that even as our lives are gifts from God, so is this place. I'm clear that we perceive this place to be a gift---but in many ways we perceive it as a gift from one another---in what we do in Altar guild, in the clothes drives and Oktoberfests, in the work of the vestry---we're here this morning recognizing Barbara's ministry---her gift of herself to all of us in these past 10 some odd years. Now, it's true that this church is our gift to each other, but it is, even more, God's gift to us---God working through each of us to give this gift to all of us. Stewardship, then, is the care we give this community, to nurture this gift for the sake of the world.

That's the thing of it, isn't it—that we only understand this gift from God if we understand it as God's gift, through us, to our world? That's why we speak of stewardship. If the gift was only for us, then we could do with it what we pleased---I'll give Andrew and Christopher any number of gifts over the next few years, and some they will take care of and some they will destroy---but at that point, the toys will be theirs, and if they destroy them---well, then they'll learn something about not having those toys any more---but that's not the logic of the Church---it's not simply ours to do with as we please---it's ours to nurture for the sake of others.... When we talk about Stewardship, we need to be clear that it isn't just about our lives and how we dispose of them---it is also about this community, and how we care for the world through it.

We also need to be clear, though, that when we talk about this community for the sake of the world, we really do mean, first and foremost, this community. At St Thomas we are for the world in many ways---in the support we give a variety of ministries through our outreach budget, through our participation in the regional ministry to Dungannon, in our opening of our buildings to a variety of community groups. But we are for the world most importantly just by being the community that we are. We are the greatest gift we have to offer the world—not our money or our labour or our buildings, but us, our fellowship, our care for one another.

I realized that I made a mistake when I didn't put the alternate psalm from the lectionary in the order of service this morning—Ps. 84, the one that we read. It presents the most concise definition of what it is to be the Church and how the Church is for the world---

“The sparrow has found her a house and the swallow a nest where she may lay her young by the side of your altars, O Lord of Hosts....” That’s what the world is thirsty for—that’s what our souls long for--a place to call home, where we can nest and lay our young. You hear it in the words of this morning’s processional hymn. You see it everywhere in the DC metro area—folks who have plenty of places to work, but in desperate need of home, of family, of community, of a place where they might nest.

This community is God’s gift because we are this safe nesting ground---we house the altar of God where the sparrow finds a home. That’s what it means when God gives us Church and makes us Church---it means that God makes us this home. It’s what it means that this table sits at the center of our lives---here we invite the world to our family’s thanksgiving feast.

So that’s the theory of what it is for us to be Church---we are a gift that we’ve received from God---we are a community in which we’ve found blessing, and we are to share this blessing of community with a world hungry for it. That’s the theory, but what’s the reality of Church in this place? I guess the easiest way to put it is that I was led to the theory by the reality that I’ve learned and experienced here. I’ve been reminded of what it means to be Church as I’ve come to know you, and that’s been exciting. I’ve wanted to talk about what I learned in the desserts that you hosted and in which you participated for me. I do so in my Rector’s corner in this coming Messenger, and I want to begin to do so now.

What I learned of this Church in those meetings is that the center of your identity is occupied by the emphasis that you place on this community. It lies in the value you place on the warmth, the nurture, the welcome, and the inclusiveness of this place. There is so much that you do to augment and embody this warmth and nurture---you make beautiful music, you offer programming for your children and youth, you pray, you make casseroles, you balance budgets (or at least try to), you work to educate yourselves and one another. All that is good, but it all means something for you primarily because it embodies the warmth, welcome, and nurture of this place. None of these efforts is in or for themselves, but they are all directed to making this the home, the nest that you long for and need in the midst of the craziness of our area

This was an important recognition for me, the centrality of warmth, welcome, and nurture to our identity, as I've thought about how we should go forward in the next few years. As we talked about all that we wanted to develop and all that we wanted to preserve in our future, it struck me that there is a creative tension in this identity that will yield a fruitful dynamism to our lives. It's the tension generated by our commitment to warmth and to welcome---our commitment to nurture one another and the manner that our nurture will draw on warmth and welcome in what they offer to each other.

We are here because this is a warm community—it is intimate, we know one another and we're able to care for one another because of that knowledge. People here have names and faces---and that's who God created us to be---people who are known by name, people who know one another by name. And yet, integral to our warmth is the fact that

we are so welcoming, so open and embracing of those who are new. We don't maintain our warmth by closing our doors; rather, the openness of our doors and our attentiveness to those who come through them defines our warmth for us in many ways. Most of us are here not only because this is a warm community but also because we were at some point welcomed into that warmth. The particular warmth of our community in many ways demands that we be a welcoming community, reaching out and making space for those presently outside our doors.

At the same time, we welcome folks to this community only as we maintain the warmth and intimacy that makes this a community in which people will not only be welcomed, but included and embraced. We do a good job of learning the names of those who are new and helping them to find their way around our community, but the heart of our welcome has always been our ability to bring people into our community. We not only have learned each other's names—we have come to know and serve each other. Indeed, a distinctive piece of our welcome of those who are new to us is the manner in which we allow them to serve, and not just to be served early in their tenure with us—just ask folks who have been asked to lead ministries in their fourth week here or serve on the vestry in their second year. That's when you know you've been admitted into the family—not when you're invited to sit at the table, but when you're allowed to clear and wash the dishes.

The nurture that we provide one another, the program that we develop to encourage our growth in the life of God's family—it grows out of this warmth and welcome in so many

ways. That's what my effort to invite the children forward at the time of the Eucharist has been about. I've wanted them to be able to see what's going on—I want them to begin to understand, and to feel like they have a place at God's table---that this is an altar where the sparrow can raise her young. I've also wanted to take advantage of the fullness of our space—to help us to see that we can use all of our space as we gather around God's table—that you don't need to be packed into the pews like sardines while I stand apart in the great plain of holiness---but rather, that we can all gather around God's table and, in that gathering, we can make space for those who are new to our family, even as we make space for our children who are new to the life of this table.

In this year's pledge campaign, we're trying to support a budget that embodies our identity as a warm, welcoming, and nurturing community in very simple ways. It tries to provide the staffing through which we can run the program that allows us to nurture one another. We're trying to provide for the upkeep of our buildings, so that this truly is a welcoming space. Soon, we may ask how we need to expand this space—or at least the parking access to it—but that is not yet. For now, we're simply trying to fund who we are—who we have been—because that is the greatest gift that we have to offer this world. Pray in the coming weeks about the gift of this community in your lives and ask what we need to do to let it be a blessing in the world. Amen.