

Sermon by The Rev. Betsy Johns Roadman, 6/5/05
St. Augustine's Church, Croton-on-Hudson, NY
Text: Matthew 9:9-13

Except for attendance at a few 5 p.m. services, my first real experience of life at St. Augustine's was at JuneFest last year. Larry and I came to the dinner and auction on Saturday night, knowing only two people. And we loved it. We loved that people introduced themselves to us and included us, though they'd never laid eyes on us before. We loved that the food was delicious, but not fancy or catered. We loved the creativity and the diversity of the auction offerings. We loved the enthusiasm with which the bidding took place - the support and appreciation expressed as each auction item was introduced. The next day, even with crummy weather, scores of people staffed booths, ran games, and seemed to be having a fabulous time doing it. I remember thinking, "This is what community is supposed to look like."

Community is one of the things that St. A's does best. Events are approached with excitement and carried out with widespread support and participation. People seem to value every opportunity to be together. Coffee hour at St. A's is practically a sacrament. There's warmth, energy, and inclusion. This is what community is supposed to look like.

If we had to define it simply, I wonder if we might say that community is what St. A's is about. Being about community is a wonderful thing.

Today's Gospel reading is one of scores of examples of what Jesus was about. Time and time again, according to the Gospel writers, Jesus was about noticing those who were the outsiders - those who were despised and shunned by the proper people, the "nice" people, the religious people. Jesus was about intentionally seeking out those who weren't noticed and who were left behind, spending time with them, and communicating the reality of the love and presence of God to them, through word and action. Jesus was about breaking down boundaries - between the righteous and the unrighteous, the acceptable and the unacceptable, the haves and the have-nots. Jesus was, himself, about building community. He drew people to himself so that they might be fed, healed, and forgiven. When stomachs and souls were filled, and healing occurred, and forgiveness took hold, lives were transformed. And when that happened, Jesus then sent those same people out to do what he did, so that the kingdom of God might be established in and through them.

I believe that we at St. A's, who are so much about community, are ready to take a next step. It seems to me that over a number of years, community in this place has been, rightfully, about welcoming, and drawing in, and caring for, so that we might become and remain a vibrant and solvent parish. Building community has been intentional, and it's been hard work. We're now experiencing the abundant fruit of that labor.

But the goal of our life together in Christ isn't, ultimately, to exist for ourselves. Our purpose isn't to experience meaningful liturgy, to worship in a lovely, historic building, to enjoy incredibly special fellowship, just so that we can all be together and do it again next week. Our worship, our experience of community, all the ways that we seek to

deepen and strengthen our faith are for the specific intention of being a light to the world, an agent of healing and transformation, empowered by the love and presence of God.

According to the experts, every priest in charge of a congregation needs to make an “I have a dream” speech at least once a year – to affirm the strengths of that congregation and to issue a challenge. So, on the anniversary weekend of my first taste of JuneFest – St. A’s ultimate example of community – I offer you my dream.

Right now, the money that we raise through community-building events like JuneFest, October Fest, the Wreath Sale, and the Winter Auction, is mostly for us – so that we might remain a vibrant and solvent parish. Right now, that money raised through events makes up the difference between what we receive in pledges, plate offering, and other sources of income, and what we actually need to be able to pay the bills – for staff, utilities, programs, repair of the buildings, our diocesan assessment. We don’t spend lavishly on ourselves; the budget is absolutely bare-bones. The dream that I have for St. A’s is that that gap between income and expenses would be made up, instead, by increased giving on our part. My dream is that every dollar raised at these events at which our parishioners give so much of themselves, and at which the blessing and gift of community is so evident, would be designated, completely, for outreach.

Can you imagine what it would be like for us to be able to sell quiche at the gourmet food booth and hamburgers from the grill so that all the money we made on food went to a soup kitchen in Ossining or to a feeding program in a refugee camp? Wouldn’t it be amazing to be able to run children’s games with the specific goal of sending a dozen inner-city kids to camp? What about bidding on items at the auction so that homeless families in Westchester could be temporarily housed at a center, staffed by a social worker, at which vocational counseling and job training were offered?

I’m convinced that the commitment to and the participation in a JuneFest at which all the money is given away would be even greater than it is right now. And what a model of community that would be!

All it would take for this dream to be realized would be for us to make up the gap in the budget that the revenue from JuneFest fills with sacrificial giving on our part. That would require significant gifts from a few, and small, but important, increases in giving from many. We can do that! When, during an interview, our top candidate for rector asks, as I promise he or she will, “What is St. Augustine’s commitment to outreach?” imagine what it would be like to answer, “This is what we’re about: we will pour heart and soul into community-building events, so that we can give away \$20,000 or \$25,000 each year.” This is not an impossible dream.

Jesus was about building community so that boundaries might be broken down, including the boundaries between those who have and those who don’t. Might we at St. A’s, who have so very much, be called to be that kind of community? Amen.