

April 28/29, 2007
St. Augustine's Episcopal Church
Sermon by Gail Wilson

Nine years ago, I came here for a Sunday Service on a whim. I came because my best friend Regina wanted to come here and didn't want to come alone. I came because she promised we could go out for pancakes at the Riverside Diner afterwards.

Now, you need to know that I did not spend a lot of time in Church during my childhood – probably because my parents were Jewish. So I think perhaps I can understand the disbelief of the Israelites as they listened to Paul preach about the resurrection of Jesus. The whole concept was foreign to them, as it was to me that first day. The image of Jesus on the cross made me uncomfortable – I couldn't bring myself to look up at it. Although Paul's sermon in the temple was well received, the inclusionary message was not universally accepted.

For me, it was precisely the inclusionary message that drew me in. "All are welcome". Something happened to me that very first day, and on the subsequent Sundays that followed. I started listening very carefully to the words that were being said, the messages that were being conveyed and the texture and rhythm of the prayers. As a lawyer, I wanted to analyze every word and understand its meaning.

Being Jewish, the words "We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church" didn't just roll off the tongue easily – or lightly.

Several things surprised me as those weeks unfolded – things perhaps you might take for granted. The entire service was in English. The readings were from both the Old and the New Testament. The concept of bread and wine was familiar to me, although here it held a very different significance. I couldn't believe I was in a room full of grown ups singing their hearts out someplace other than the shower. I had forgotten how wonderful singing can make you feel.

I was amazed that a sermon could actually be interesting and relevant. I took something away with me that I could reflect on during the week, and that had the potential to change the way I viewed the world and how I interacted with others. I was hooked.

The last nine years have been an amazing period of change and growth for me – personal growth, spiritual growth and career success. I have made friends here that will be my friends for life.

In today's Gospel, the Jews asked Jesus, "If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly", and Jesus responded, "I have told you and you do not believe". "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me".

I understand that sheep actually learn to respond to the voice of their shepherd when he calls – that they can differentiate between human voices, and they know when it is their shepherd who calls them.

Here, at St. Augustine's, I can hear the voice of Jesus – as it has been spoken to me by many of you, on many different occasions – when we do the prayers of the people, when we welcome the newly baptized with a rousing “we will”, when I learned how to tie a bow and those little berries on a Christmas wreath, when our children share their ideas about faith and God in Sunday School, when friends and husbands and wives vie to outbid each other at the June Fest auction, when the choir sings and Deacon proclaims the dismissal - during all of these times I can hear the voice, and I am beginning to understand the message.

The voice calls upon us to serve others, and through those acts of service, we can find ourselves, and find peace. In the beginning, I couldn't understand why Regina would bake cookies, put four of five of them in a little plastic baggie and sell them at the Bake Sale for 50 cents a piece. I said, “Why don't you just write a check to the church for \$20 dollars and be done with it?” She would look at me and say, “You just don't get it, do you?” Well, now I get it. I heard the voice. I came into the sheepfold.

One of the things that has troubled me over the past few years is my inability to fully participate in some of our parish activities – because I don't live in Croton – I live in Pleasantville. It's just too far for me get here during the week. So little things like dropping off treasures for the rummage sale, decorating wreaths, coming to a bible study class or a youth council movie are just logistically difficult.

I have also figured out that most people go to church in the town where they live – I think that is the meaning of “community service” – serving others in your community. I came up with two possible solutions to this problem – either I needed to move to Croton, or I should be going to church in Pleasantville.

I have spoken to some of you about this, and you already know that we have no plans to move to Croton. We live in Pleasantville. We like Pleasantville. In many ways, the Episcopal Church in Pleasantville reminds me of where St. A's was 10 years ago. They have a new Rector. They have potential and they have a vision. Maybe they need an infusion of energy to make it happen.

Thinking about joining a different parish has been a heart wrenching internal debate that I have struggled with for a long time. I believe at this point in my life, and in my children's lives, this is the appropriate next step for us. I see opportunities to get involved more fully, to serve the community in ways that go beyond attending services on Sunday. I see the opportunity to make a difference – to do what Jesus asks us to do - in a way that I have not been able to do here – not because I haven't been asked, not because I haven't been welcomed and

loved - but just because I live too far away. As complicated as the decision feels, it is really just as simple as that.

I don't see this as an end to a chapter in my life, but rather a new beginning, another step in my spiritual journey. Nine years ago, I needed to be here, and I wasn't strong enough to even consider going anywhere else. Five years ago, I needed to be here. One year ago, I still needed to be here – especially during the time of transition from the old rector to the new.

Finding our way as a parish, finding our voice, watching the search committee lead the way towards finding our new rector taught me that its not about the priest (with all due respect to Brad and Betsy, we love you both dearly), but is about how we conduct ourselves in this world and how we operate as a parish - the choices that we make, the way we treat each other and the work that we do to help others. It is about how we lead, by setting an example.

When I think about the lesson of the Good Shepherd, I am reminded of one of Father Barry's sermons. He told a story of driving with a friend on a country road in England, and being held up by a flock of sheep crossing the road in a leisurely fashion. Being late for an appointment he and his friend got out of the car and tried to push the sheep, one at a time, off the road and out of the way of the car. The wise old shepherd came over to them (probably laughing), held his crook up high and said, "You don't push sheep, you lead them" and with that he walked away from the road, and the sheep followed.

So my intention for the next phase in my journey is not to "leave" St. A's but to "lead" from St. A's. I want to bring to my friends in Pleasantville some of the warmth, the energy, the ideas, the vibrancy and love of this wonderful parish.

I hope that if I can export even a little bit of the magic that we have here just a few miles down the road, that it will take root and grow, and that I can once again find a spiritual home.

By stumbling in here that one Sunday nine years ago, I found many things I didn't know I was missing. I heard the voice, I listened to the voice, and my life is so much richer for it. I want to thank each and every one of you for being there for me and for being part of this amazing experience.

May we all hear the voice, and find the strength and guidance we need as we travel alone and as we travel together. Amen.