

Sermon by The Rev. Betsy Johns Roadman, 1/29/06
St. Augustine's Church, Croton-on-Hudson, New York
Annual Meeting – Texts: Collect of the Day; I Corinthians 8:1b-13; Mark 1:21-28

In the last few days, members of the Stewardship Committee and I have been making phone calls to parishioners from whom we hadn't yet received a pledge card for 2006. Mostly, people simply hadn't gotten around to it. Some said that they didn't feel able to pledge this year because of a precarious financial situation.

But I had a few conversations with people about their hesitation to commit to financially support the church because they don't know exactly where they stand right now in relationship to the church – not so much St. A's in particular, but more the institutional church, the bearer of traditional Christianity. The people with whom I spoke love our parish family and this sacred space. But they're struggling with what they actually believe. They come here to worship; they sing the magnificent hymns; they pray in the beautiful language of our Book of Common Prayer. And they're just not sure how much of all of it they can actually embrace.

One parent is struggling with whether or not to have her child baptized because she's not sure that she can make the promises of the baptismal covenant on behalf of her child, in the context of our corporate worship, without feeling like a hypocrite. Another is reeling, emotionally and spiritually, following the accidental death of 16-year-old Noah Woodley-Aitcheson of Ossining a couple of weeks ago. Like Noah's parents, this parishioner prays daily for his children's health and safety. How does one explain, then, God's involvement, or lack thereof, in Noah's life on the evening of January 13th, when the car in which he was riding slid off the road and hit a tree? How does what happened to Noah square with today's collect, in which we addressed God as the one who "governs all things both in heaven and earth?" If that's true, how was God governing Noah's life on January 13th? Had God taken a break around 10 p.m.? Was it God's will that Noah be involved in an accident and die that night?

How do we hold the words of so many of the psalms - which seem to say that God rewards those who live righteously and punishes those who don't - alongside other scripture texts that claim that God's blessing isn't dependent upon who we are or what we do? How do we relate to a biblical passage such as today's epistle, which deals with food sacrificed to idols? How is that the word of God for us? How do we approach gospel accounts like the one that we've just heard from Mark, in which an unclean spirit inhabits the body of someone, taunting Jesus, leading Jesus to exorcise that spirit? Did it really happen that way? Is what we understand today as "mental illness" the same as what was at that time called unclean spirits or demons? Are there phrases in the Nicene Creed that we simply can't, in good conscience, say that we fully believe?

A preacher can address a passage or two from the week's appointed lectionary, or a situation taking place in our community or globally, or a difficult theological concept or doctrine for about twelve minutes before people begin to get restless. Twelve minutes once a week in a sermon isn't enough to begin to engage our relationship with God, the

life and work of Jesus, and our calling and response as people of God. The occasional Christian education class offered to adults at the church is a start, but it's not enough. A child attending Sunday School consistently still receives only about ten or eleven hours of Christian education instruction in the course of a Sunday School year. How can that possibly provide a solid spiritual foundation for our kids?

Last June, I articulated a dream for St. A's: that every dollar that we raised through JuneFest, the wreath sale, and our other fundraising efforts would go toward outreach, and that we as a parish family would give enough through our own contributions to make St. A's self-supporting in terms of our operating budget. Sadly, despite lots of enthusiasm and extraordinarily hard work on the part of the Stewardship Committee, this year's stewardship campaign has fallen far short of that goal. So I'm feeling a bit gunshy, and I'm wondering how realistic my dreams for this parish might be.

But my remaining time here at St. A's is limited. There's every reason to believe that your new rector will be standing right here by the first weekend in May. And I do have another dream that I'd like to share with you, especially as we approach the one-year anniversary of my term as your interim pastor.

This dream is that we, as individuals and families, would make the care and nurture of our lives with God a top priority; that each of us would newly commit to taking responsibility for the state of our soul. I would so love to see every adult who considers himself or herself a member of St. A's meeting together regularly with others to consider the hard questions of faith, to pray together, to try to discern the truths of the Bible together, to grow in relationship with each other, to reach out to others together. I'd so love to see members of our youth council talking with each other about what they believe and don't believe, and why; and whether what they believe has any impact on the decisions that they make day to day. I'd love to see how our young people would do church if they could plan and implement the liturgy.

I'd love to see parents of young children meeting together over potluck suppers, talking about how to raise children who know and love God, and sharing resources for the Christian education of their children in the home and within the family. I'd love to see a group of professionals meeting regularly to consider how their life of faith is lived out in the work place; a gathering of those interested in exploring the implications of God as Sacred Feminine, as mother; a study group reading through one or more of Marcus Borg's books, in which he articulates the ancient doctrines of the church and the truths of scripture in fresh, new ways that have the potential to re-ignite our passion for God, to revitalize our own journey of faith, and to re-imagine the possibilities for the Body of Christ that is the church.

It can be so hard to see and to know God in our harried and complex lives. Our weekly corporate worship, our adult and children's education classes at the church, and our personal, individual devotions and service are vehicles in and through which we can and do grow in our faith. But I believe that it's in relationship with others who are also seeking God – an intentional, regular, honest, searching relationship with others in the

Body of Christ – that we'll begin to be able to answer our hardest questions and to make some sense of this life of faith.

This parish family is a treasure. God has been and will continue to be present and faithful in our midst. We've just completed an amazing year in which individuals and groups have manifested spiritual gifts that they didn't even know that they had, in profound ways that have had an extraordinary impact on our life together as a parish family. We're in the position of being able to call a new rector into a vibrant, eager community of faith.

May we take the next step: committing ourselves in this new season of life at St. A's to take responsibility for the deepening of our life in Christ in relationship with each other. May we make the state of our soul our top priority. Together, let's consider the hard questions of faith; become familiar with our tradition, including the Bible and the Prayer Book; pray with and for each other; dream about what our church can and should be; and expect to encounter the living God in and through each other. Amen.