

Sermon by The Rev. Betsy Johns Roadman, April 30, 2006
St. Augustine's Church, Croton-on-Hudson, New York
Farewell Sermon

Not long ago, I had a conversation with a friend who's in seminary. We were talking about the challenge of preaching with integrity, creativity, and passion, week after week. He suggested that the difficulty of staying fresh in the pulpit is complicated by the fact that, according to him, every preacher actually gives only one sermon, over and over again. "Each of us has just one basic sermon in us," he insisted. "We keep preaching that same core sermon; it's just set in different contexts, depending on the appointed lectionary passages, or what's going on in our own lives or in the life of our parish, or what's happening in the world."

Could that be true? Do I preach only one basic sermon, even though the Scripture that supposedly inspires it, and the stories that I use to illustrate it are different each week? I actually went back to look at many of my past sermons to see if my friend's premise has any merit.

I can confidently report that I don't agree with Alan. I don't have just one sermon in me. I have four. There definitely has been a pattern to what I've been saying here in the last year and a half, first as assistant priest, and then as interim pastor. And on this, my last Sunday with you, I'm going to preach all four!

The theme of one sermon is this: God is love. God's love for us is total and unconditional. There's nothing that we can ever do that will make God love us more than God loves us right this moment. There's nothing that we can do that will cause us to lose God's love, now or ever. All that we are and all that we have is a gift from God. That gives us extraordinary freedom in our relationship with God and evokes a sense of profound gratitude. Living in and with such gratitude transforms us to be, more and more, the people God has created us to be.

The second sermon concerns what being a follower of Jesus means. Our tradition teaches that the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth was the full and perfect expression of God's love, character, and intention. In Jesus, we see God in terms that we can understand and relate to. If, because of the recognition and the experience of God's love in our lives, we choose to respond by embracing the way of Jesus, we will discover a path that will lead us to new life - to salvation. Jesus' life and ministry were about love, about forgiveness, about abundant generosity, about standing with the oppressed, about servant hood. As followers of Jesus, that's what our lives can be about as well.

Third sermon: Jesus didn't simply provide the example of a moral life that we must then work hard to try to imitate. Jesus lives, and the risen Christ is present with us. The power and presence of Christ in and among us opens our hearts to compassion for others and compels us to respond to their needs. Because of the power and the presence of Christ in and among us, we're given both a vision of how things can be and the courage, strength, and hope to work toward that vision.

And the fourth sermon is this. We need each other. While the presence, power, and love of God is very real and vibrant in each of our lives individually, it's in community that the spark becomes the fire. Each one of us receives insight from Scripture, from the world around us, and from our own unique experience that will encourage and strengthen the spiritual life of others.

Each one of us has been abundantly blessed with unique gifts and abilities with which to join God in the work that God is doing in the world. But not one of us, even those seminary-trained and ordained, can know or do everything. It's only in community that each of us can fully experience new life in Christ.

This past year and a half has been a wild ride for me. Many of you know that when I was ordained, I never intended that the focus of my ministry would be in the parish. I was much more inclined toward chaplaincy – in the hospital, or in hospice, or in the prison. But just like doing a couple of years of medical/surgical nursing is a good idea for someone who then goes on to specialize in public health or trauma, a couple of years in the parish is good preparation for every other type of ordained ministry. By the time I'd left Christ's Church in Rye to come here, I knew a couple of things about myself: I wanted to be associated with a parish, but I craved the flexibility to do other things that the needs of full-time parish ministry simply don't allow. And, I wanted to be associated with a small church. I wanted to be able to get to know everyone and to actually be involved in their lives.

Serving as the assistant priest here was the dream job that I'd been hoping for – but that lasted only four months. Yet, I truly felt called to serve as your interim pastor, and I'm grateful for the opportunity, even though it means that my relationship with you, as we've known it during this interim period, must now end. I'm so proud of the work that we've done together as we grieved David Carlson's departure, considered what God intended for us moving forward, and worked together to deepen and strengthen our life of faith, in preparation for Brad's leadership and the next season of life at St. A's.

I honestly don't know what's next for me vocationally. During my open-ended sabbatical, I'm looking forward to worshipping at lots of churches of different denominations. I'll continue the program that I started in January that will prepare me to become a spiritual director and see where that leads. I'll still be involved at Sing Sing and will continue to serve as Diocesan Coordinator for the Education for Ministry program. I'll explore hospice work. There are many possibilities, and that's quite exciting.

But I will really miss all of you. We've learned from each other as we've rejoiced, grieved, ranted, studied, prayed, cleaned, and dreamed together. And while it's very hard to say goodbye, this may not be the end of the story for us, because Brad and I have talked about the possibility of my being associated with St. A's again at some point in the future. In the meantime, though, I need to disappear. It's important that the time during which you and Brad begin getting to know each other and working together isn't complicated by the presence of the priest who's most recently been in leadership.

So, as this phase of our relationship together ends, may we give thanks with grateful hearts, recognizing the amazing things that God has done in our midst, and may we anticipate with joy all that's to come. Amen.