**“Becoming a Newcomer”**

A sermon for the 14th Sunday after Pentecost

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The Rev. Christopher Wendell

St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Bedford, MA

Today is a day for new beginnings – as we come together to kick off another program year here at St. Paul’s. Perhaps, for some of us, this might be our first September at this (or any) church, and it may all seem overwhelming. Everything is new: the people friendly, but unfamiliar; the unusual words like Catechesis and Kairos and Eucharist interesting but strange; the announcements confusing and unending. Other among us may feel as though we’ve run this particular race more than a few times before. We’ve got our friends. We know where the bathrooms are. We’re almost sure when we’re supposed to stand and sit and kneel. We got this church thing down. Most of us are somewhere in between; all of us are welcome.

Because the real gift of this day is the invitation to all of us, to become beginners again. To wonder how God will come to us in a new way this year. To discern how each of us is being made new, as we draw closer to the love of Jesus. You see, we, St. Paul’s, have never been like this before. God has never brought all of these exact people into this exact place at this exact moment in our individual and communal history. We might mostly look the same, but no, we are different, and this year will be its own new journey for us. And you are new, too. Even those for whom this is your 20th or 30th or 50th year at St. Paul’s. Today, you too are a new-comer to this church because you arrive in a new way. And so too am I, coming to this place anew. I am reminded of the words of TS Eliot’s famous poem Little Gidding, “We shall not cease from exploration / And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time.”[[1]](#footnote-1) May our journey this year lead us to know this place, this community, this church, our worship, and our God again for the first time.

Given that today’s theme is new beginnings and fresh explorations, perhaps you find it a bit strange, as I do, that the Gospel passage that we just heard is about the legal procedures that Matthew’s community used to kick out trouble makers. Jesus offers many teachings in Matthew’s Gospel: about loving both friends and enemies; about the priority caring for the most vulnerable among us; about having the strength to stand up against the forces of injustice; about the blessing it is to work for peace – yet it is this teaching that the lectionary invites us to reflect on today.

In some ways, I couldn’t imagine a more ill-timed passage for us to hear as we re-gather together, as we re-welcome each other back into our common life in Christ. It seems to run counter to the ethos of broad welcome and invitation that our community value so highly. More troublingly, it seems to warn us away from the fearless theological curiosity and self-giving moral courage that Jesus so often encourages in us. And, frankly, it seems to scholars to be a kind of legalistic proceduralism that was the invention of Matthew’s community around the turn of the first century, rather than something Jesus prescribed. This is made especially clear when Matthew puts into Jesus’ mouth the idea that getting kicked out of the church means being treated like tax-collecters and sinners – people with whom Jesus regularly hung out, made friends, and explicitly said that he loved, despite the fact that everyone else seemed to hate them.

So yeah. Not the best Gospel to start the year. And yet. There may be something for us here after all.

Years ago, when I was first learning how to read the Bible, which is in fact its own particular skill set, the priest who was helping me offered me a framework that I’ve used ever since. He compared the Bible to a forest. Sometimes the beauty is in the individual tree, or in a single leaf on the tree, or even in the tiny insect on the leaf. But other times the beauty is in the majesty of how the many trees fit together, and if you focus too intently on only one, you miss the totality of what God is up to.

If today’s Gospel passage was a tree, its species would be called something like “excommunicating the trouble makers”. But the forest in which it is located is called “Life in Christian Community.” Because that’s really the theme of this passage and of the passages before and after it in Matthew’s Gospel. These are teachings and parables that explore what it means to live as a friend of Jesus in relationship with other friends of Jesus: the joys, the challenges, the opportunities, and the spiritual gifts that such a life brings with it. They cover topics like forgiving others, developing more humility, caring more deeply for strangers, responding to wrongdoing, working through messy relationships, lessening our preoccupations with material wealth, and increasing our self-giving on behalf of others. These values lie at the heart of the Christian life, and are what we are trying to work on here as a Christian community, year in and year out. So a more contemporary name for this particular forest might be “Why bother coming to church?”

There’s no better time to think about our answers to that question than today, as begin again to try and “arrive where we started and know it for the first time.” Teacher and writer Marilyn McEntyre wrote an essay this month for the magazine “Comment” in which she uses contemporary language to name a few of the trees for her in this particular forest. She’s a lay person, not a priest, so I think her list of what church does for us is particularly relevant. There are 5 things. These are her words.[[2]](#footnote-2)

1. **“Church helps you get over yourself**…by inviting us into a story much larger than our own. In a healthy church you begin to recognize yourself as someone with gifts to give—time, money, energy, expertise—and you begin to want to give them, because the grace that comes with giving is suddenly so startlingly apparent. You find a compassionate curiosity growing in you that leads you into conversation with people you might otherwise have avoided. You take a second look at them as you reach out to exchange with them a peace that sometimes passes understanding.
2. **Church allows you to acknowledge guilt and experience forgiveness.** Most of us carry around guilt like a stone in a pocket. Sometimes you get so used to its weight you stop even noticing it. It's certainly possible to give and receive forgiveness without benefit of church. But within the church a dimension of forgiveness is taught and practiced [enabling us to] walk in freedom, straight to those places where we have amends to make, and make them with lighter and more hopeful hearts. We can afford to confess because confession doesn't mire us in shame, but lifts us into sure and certain hope and a life of gratitude.
3. **Church invites you into countercultural community**. It will look at social norms with a critical eye, holding them up to the light of Christ. It will lead you to identify with and act on behalf of the disempowered: migrant workers, prisoners, people with no health insurance, people whose lands and water have been expropriated or contaminated, underpaid laborers, victims of domestic abuse. The list goes on.
4. **Church gives you access to a treasury of words and images**. To study the Bible with people of faith is to see it not only as an object of academic or antiquarian interest but also as a living word, a source of intellectual challenge, inspiration, comfort, uncomfortable ambiguities, and endless insights
5. **Church is a place of divine encounter.** Distracted, reluctant, confused, or apathetic you may be on any given Sunday, but if you go, something will happen. A word, a phrase, a flicker of candlelight, a gesture, an image, an extended moment of silence—all these have their effects. It's not always the sermon—a good sermon is hard to find. And sometimes the readers read poorly or the person behind me can't stop coughing [etc. etc.] But underneath the distractions and irritations runs a current so strong it carries me in spite of myself. I float in mighty waters.”

If you want to read the whole article, I’ll post it to our Church’s Facebook page this afternoon. But I wonder, how this list strikes you. Not so much whether you agree or disagree with any of the particular items (I might make some edits, personally). Rather, I wonder which of these things church is doing for you? Any of them? All of them? Or, if not, which would you like it do more? If, as you heard one, you found your heart saying “Yes, that. I want that. More, please. That’s what I need.” Then maybe that is how God is inviting you to get to know church again for the first time this year. Maybe that is Jesus’s gentle reminder that none of us ever really “have church down”. Maybe that feeling is the Holy Spirit renewing her promise to us, that through life in Christian community, we too can become a new creation. And if you didn’t have that feeling, maybe that is God too, encouraging you to wonder again what the yearning is that brings you here to this altar in the world. Amen.

1. Eliot, T.S. (1942) *Little Gidding.* London: Faber and Faber. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. McEntyre, Marilyn. “Choosing Church” *Comment Magazine*. Vol. 35, Iss. 3 (2017). Accessed at https://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/5114/choosing-church/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)