Stewardship Sermon by The Rev. Rachel Wildman

St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Bedford MA

October 31, 2021

I wrestled mightily this week with this stewardship sermon. I burned through most of the time I had set aside for sermon prep with our readings for today, trying to squeeze from them a new revelation related to stewardship that I could bring to you this morning. They really do support the importance of church—especially church at St. Paul’s—with Ruth and Naomi companioning one another after the deaths of their husbands, and Jesus proclaiming love for God, love for other, and love for self as the “way” to new life.

But, you guys know that already. I see you companioning one another through widowhood, and many other immense challenges. And love as central to a life of faith—you guys know that and live *it* too.

And, you guys know that the lights need to be kept on and building maintenance done and staff salaries paid. You guys know if not all, then at least some, of the caretaking and advocacy work done here. You know of the community that you are invited to be part of it, to be challenged by, to be loved in. And you know that money is needed to facilitate a lot of that.

And you know that most of that stuff can be found elsewhere. There are myriad opportunities in our local and wider community to volunteer on behalf of others; there are support groups for those experiencing grief; there are even incredibly loving and supportive communities found in crossfit gyms and kickball leagues. That we “do” all these things for others is good…but there are other places that do them, too.

So, what it is about St. Paul’s that makes it unique—why, in a world with so many other options, pledge your time, your talent or skill, and your money *here*? Why do *I* pledge my money here—I mean after all, it could just be seen as paying my own salary, right?

Well, for me, it is beauty. What is different about church, most especially *this* church, is that we do all these things in ways that reveal profound beauty, and then we bathe in it, breathe it in, use it as fuel to stretch us and pull us farther and wider into the work of God’s love.

Beauty is something I don’t get nearly as consistently, and never with as much glorious breadth and depth, as I do in participating in the life of St. Paul’s. And if there is one thing the often-crushing reality of our world has convinced me of these past 2 years, especially, it is that beauty is absolutely fundamental to my faith. It is the sensate reminder to me that *God is present*.

You know, when I lead our parish preschoolers in worship or exploration, I often ask them where they see God in their lives. I have learned, though, that that question is too abstract. So, I always suggest that where they see beauty, they see God. For them, beauty is still something they understand to be experienced only by the eyes, and their answers reveal that. So, I also often encourage them to identify experiences of goodness and truth as additional revelations of God in their lives. As they grow, I imagine they will come to understand that goodness and truth *are* beautiful—beautiful as experienced by our feelings, our minds, our spirits—the core of who we are…that beauty, as experienced by all our senses and by our interior beings, is the primary language in which God speaks.

When I am pierced beholding something of stunning beauty, I know that to be God saying hello…or come see…or I love you…or, I love *this*—this beautiful thing, or event, or experience, or person.

This is not to say that visual beauty isn’t present anywhere else in our lives… Or that the beauty of truth and goodness aren’t anywhere else in our lives.

It is simply to note that, for me, what’s unique about church, and especially about St. Paul’s, is that beauty is among us consistently, overwhelmingly, and transformatively…to come into the sphere of this community…to walk alongside one another here and out in the world, is to be immersed in beauty—to be immersed in the assurance that God is present.

There is inarguably physical beauty here. Like so many sacred spaces this church is a feast for the eyes. There are the rich colors and fabrics of our altar linens which change with our church seasons, the simple beauty of the stained glass window, so much a part of our St. Paul’s identity. There are the brilliant silver and gold-plated chalice and paten (the bread plate, for those of you who aren’t liturgy wonks), and the brilliant light that bathes the sanctuary, and the parish hall, and our children’s worship spaces in the back with all of their glorious windows.

There is also much else here that is beautiful. Beauty is not only, or sometimes at all, about what we can see. The revelation of God’s presence among us need not be pretty, to be beautiful. Righteous anger in shared action is beautiful. Vulnerability is beautiful. Grief, when held in community, is beautiful; Some of the most beautiful moments of my ministry have been during funerals.

We are hungry for beauty, God’s sensate reminder that we walk in divine light in every moment. Especially as we mourn climate change’s destruction of some of the most stunning visual and auditory beauty we could imagine, the experience of beauty is something we all need—something the world needs. We need to know, and our wider community and world need to know, that all who enter here can expect to be bathed in beauty.

So, I encourage you to give whatever you are able to give to maintain and grow this place of beauty in our world—this visual, spiritual, and relational revelation of God’s presence in our often very difficult here and now. And know that every gift, just like every person, is received here with gratitude and joy.