

What's the Message?

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Lynn C. Sanders, Associate Rector,
at the nine o'clock service, June 26, 2011, The Second Sunday after Pentecost.
Based on Matthew 10:40-42.*

How many times in your life do you realize you are standing smack in the middle of an historic crossroads? I have that sense this morning as I stand here. I believe all of us are experiencing a doubly historic moment this morning.

Actually, most of you are sitting on one part of that historic moment! Our new cathedral chairs are here. We've been bidding goodbye to our beloved old pews for some time now in preparation for this change. As I walked through the church space this week, I observed various piles of walnut and pine boards growing as workmen dismantled the pews. Actually, they didn't need much dismantling; they seem to fall apart when moved. The pew parts were carted off to temporary storage, leaving behind only the little air return boxes sticking up from the floor. They looked to me like rows of shoeboxes. Then our own hardworking Facilities staff started in on the boxes with an electric saw, various hand tools and a lot of elbow grease. They were able to remove the boxes, then use the old grates to cover the open vents, taping them securely in place, fashioning a safe, practical, temporary solution until the elegant new grates can be properly installed over the summer.

When I beheld for the first time this expanse of floor and space with no obstructions, I observed to a colleague who was carefully sweeping up the piles of ancient dust left behind, "Just think—nobody has seen the church like this since 1918." My colleague replied, "Yes, long before I was born . . . or even a twinkle in anyone's eye." An unexpected comment which made me laugh and sharpened my sense of history being made here in this holy place where I am both proud and humbled to serve.

In our wider world this weekend, one more step in history was taken, too, as the New York State Legislature passed, very late on Friday night, the Marriage Equality Act. Beginning July 24, same-sex couples can be legally married in the state of New York, and will have all the civil rights and protections and responsibilities legal marriage confers in our state.

Whether we're talking about St. Bart's cathedral chairs or the passage of New York State's Marriage Equality Act, I know there is not complete agreement on either side. I know, and I bet you do too, people of good faith who feel very differently about both historic events.

I am eager to see, and to be part of, how both these historic events will shape the life of this parish as we all live into both new realities. Being a practical sort, I'm looking at my own calendar and the church calendar, wondering if we should start preparing—like the city and town clerks throughout the state—for a surge in our wedding bookings!

It's complete chance that on this particular Sunday we have a three-way intersection of this particular gospel, the arrival of our new chairs, and same-sex marriage's becoming legal in this state. Or maybe the Holy Spirit just has a mischievous sense of humor . . . which in my experience She does.

It seems to me that both our chairs and New York's passing of the Marriage Equality Act have direct connection to our gospel reading from Matthew: "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me, welcomes the one who sent me." Whoever *receives* you *receives* me, and whoever *receives* me, *receives* the one who sent me.

In Matthew's gospel, Jesus says these words as part of what's called the "Missionary Discourse," as he is sending his twelve disciples out into the surrounding communities. He's given them his own authority and power to cure and heal, and to proclaim the good news of God's love to all who will listen, who will receive, who will welcome them. They are his agents in the field. When people welcomed Jesus' disciples, it was the same as welcoming Jesus himself, receiving God.

In Jesus' time and place, there was not a sense of "the individual," a hard thing for our own highly individualistic society to grasp. You weren't known only for what you had

achieved or for your distinctive dress or talent or abilities. Your identity was derived from the groups you belonged to—family, clan, tribe, village.

In Jesus' time and place, when one person welcomed another, it wasn't just a person-to-person interaction; it symbolized one group welcoming, *receiving*, another group. When Matthew the tax collector welcomed Jesus into his home for dinner, it wasn't just a dinner invitation. Matthew was welcoming Jesus' group, his family, his clan. When Jesus welcomes the Samaritan woman at the well, he is not just having a conversation with her, he is welcoming—*receiving*, showing hospitality to—the groups she represents: women and Samaritans, both groups who were excluded, considered “less than.”

Today we live in a much more individualistic culture, but whom we welcome as a church, and how we welcome as a church, still sends a powerful message about our own identity.

When a person walks into this place for the first time, or the 40th time, or the 4,000th time, what do they see? What do they experience? What does that tell them about who we are, about our identity, about what group(s) we represent? If you walk in here and see young people, children, old people, middle-aged people, what does that tell you? If you walk in here and see people of various colors and ethnicities and socioeconomic levels, what does that tell you? If you walk in here and see gay couples and straight couples and singles and families, what does that tell you? If you see—and hear—female priests and male priests, what does that tell you? If you see and hear all these different people greeting you, reading the lessons and prayers, making music, serving communion, taking part in the service, what message do you receive?

If you are greeted with warmth and friendliness and respect, if someone answers your questions, if someone offers you a seat—whether it's an old pew or a new chair or a folding chair or standing room only—what message do you receive? If someone listens to you and takes you seriously, if you are received and welcomed here, what does that tell you? When you hear yourself invited to share communion, what message do you receive?

I received phone calls from two different people this week, one male, one female, unknown to each other, each seeking a broader and deeper spirituality than they have known in their lives. Both had heard about St. Bart's and both had already checked us out on the Web, but have yet to visit in person. I heard in each person's voice a slight nervousness along with a real interest in and curiosity about this community. Both wonder if this might be the place for them and asked me, how do I go about finding that out? One said, “I don't want to just attend a service and then leave. I want to journey with kindred spirits, I want to be involved in the life of the community, I want to volunteer.” The other said, “I'm out and gay and I'm looking for a church home where I am accepted for who I am. But I'm not looking just to address the gay issue; I want to learn who this community is, what you stand for, how you practice. I need to see the bigger picture before I know if this is the place for me.”

This afternoon, a group of St. Bartians will make their way down Fifth Avenue as part of the Pride March. When people see the St. Bart's banner being carried by old people and young people, children and middle-aged people, people of all colors and sizes, gay people and straight people, tired people riding in the sag wagon, and even a dog or two, what message do they receive?

We as a church, like those first twelve disciples, are Jesus' agents, Jesus' messengers. The sign on our front steps reads, “Let all guests who present themselves be welcomed as Christ,” from the *Rule of St. Benedict*. We are intentional about how we welcome others here. It's our welcome as St. Bart's, yes, but it's not just our own welcome; it's the welcome we understand God has for each and every person. We are Jesus' messengers, and therefore God's messengers. We are sent to proclaim, sometimes even using words, that each person is a beloved child of God. Each person, period.

And it doesn't stop at our front doors. When we leave this place, when the worship is over and the service begins, as we go about our daily lives, we are still Jesus' messengers, and God's messengers.

What is the message that we carry?

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