
Sermon for Epiphany 7A

A sermon by Canon Todd Smelser
Epiphany 7 – Year A

It was Christmas Eve, 1970. My parents and I were standing at the baptismal font of St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Richmond, Indiana with Cory Randall, the rector. I was about to be baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Church was all decorated for Christmas, it was very cold outside, and what we were about to do seemed oddly private—but it was a beginning.

I was already a first year seminarian at Andover Newton Theological Seminary outside of Boston. Theologically I had moved from being a questioning Unitarian to a follower of Jesus, and now I wanted to make that allegiance official. My parents really weren't churchgoers at that time, so my baptism had never been discussed when I was young. I chose the Episcopal Church for my initiation rite because that's where I studied the organ in college, and there was something about the church building and the liturgy that said, "Welcome" to me. I stayed at Andover Newton all three years of seminary, since I was the chapel organist and that paid for my tuition. I did some course work at the Episcopal seminary in Cambridge and started attending the Church of the Advent in Beacon Hill when I could, but I also enjoyed the varieties of religious experience and tradition at Andover Newton.

After graduation, there weren't many job possibilities in the Diocese of Indianapolis, but luckily Cory, my sponsoring priest, was now the rector of Trinity Church in Fort Wayne, Indiana in the Diocese of Northern Indiana. He offered me a job as curate and I quickly accepted, with a starting salary of \$7000 and an apartment in the third floor of the education building. It was a wonderful parish to begin one's ministry, and I learned a great deal, but after two years I jumped at the chance to become the vicar of St. Alban's Church, a parochial mission of Trinity. Although they experienced some problems with their previous priest, it quickly became a growing congregation. Soon we needed to add a third Sunday morning service, Wednesday night Lenten programs were well attended, and the first year of our vacation bible school we had nearly 200 kids enrolled. Those were the days when church was often the center of its members' lives. I became their first rector in 1978, when I was thirty. In my spare time I was also youth coordinator for the diocese and played viola in the local symphony.

After I left St. Alban's I had a brief stint in the Diocese of New York, where I was youth and young adult coordinator for region two of that Diocese—some sixty-six parishes north of the city. In some ways it was a cushy position, but I really missed being in a parish, so started interviewing around the country. In 1983 I was called to St. John's Church in Minneapolis. Although I nearly escaped a massive snow storm when I interviewed, I fell in love with the people and their mission, and spent nine wonderful years there. We grew on many levels, and the Diocese of Minnesota was a wonderful place to serve. I probably would have stayed there, but someone put my name in for the position of dean of St. James Cathedral in Chicago. That process was rather long and complicated, and there were lots of folks who really wanted that job. But the search committee called me, and the bishop concurred, so off I went to Chicago.

Although I thought I knew how to be a rector, being dean of a rather complicated parish was a whole different skill set. St. James had a big endowment, but not many people, and contention seemed to be part of their DNA. Once the largest parish in the Diocese—and that was in 1900—they never quite regained their rather noble legacy. I served them as best I could, but when the opportunity came to leave after seven+ years I was ready. Then, after a brief interim rector experience in New

Jersey, which was a very good experience, we moved, unexpectedly, to Atlanta.

This Yankee had never lived in the South before, but soon it became home. After a brief ministry at St. Patrick's Church as associate, I got a call from Dean Candler. We had known each other when I was in Chicago and Sam was in Columbia, South Carolina. St. Philip's was undergoing some staff realignment, and soon I was offered the position of Canon for Pastoral Care and Worship. That was nearly fifteen years ago, and as they say, the rest is history—our history.

During my ministry here I have worked with the acolytes, taught Confirmation and liturgy classes, trained Eucharistic Visitors and coordinated liturgies for the Cathedral and the bishop. I've participated in LifeSpan, served on the boards of the Cathedral Book Store and Care and Counseling Center of Georgia. I've celebrated the Eucharist and visited at the Cathedral Towers and Lenbrook Square, and made hundreds of hospital and assisted living facility visits. I've counseled, and preached, and celebrated the sacraments of the church, and officiated at far too many funerals. It has been the honor and joy to have shared all of these experiences with you, members of this remarkable parish.

As many of you know, I will be retiring at the end of February, and this is my last opportunity to preach at the Sunday morning services, and I do have a few thoughts to leave with you.

These past few weeks we have been reading from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel. But the epistles have been from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, and the issues raised seem to be particularly relevant to us today.

Corinth was one of the most diverse cities in Greece, because of its importance as a major commercial and governmental center. The Christian community in this city was splintered into at least four different groups centered on different leaders. Each group asserted its status as the true and correct representation of the church of Jesus Christ. Paul reminds the Corinthians and us today that the foundation of the Church is Jesus Christ. To make his point, Paul uses the metaphor of a skilled master builder. "Each builder must choose with care how to build on it." The church is not merely another human association. It is also a divine representation of God's presence on earth. Bishops and deans and canons come and go, but Christ is made the sure foundation, Christ the head and cornerstone.

It has truly been an honor to serve in this great Cathedral for these past fifteen years, and I am most grateful to Dean Candler for the opportunity to be part of this Christian community. I have also had wonderful colleagues, ordained and lay, who are part of this great Cathedral staff. I also want to thank all of you who are members and friends of this parish. Your friendship and service continue to inspire me.

One of my favorite phrases in the burial service is that "life is changed not ended." Certainly the church has changed a great deal in the forty-two years that I have been ordained. My home parish in Richmond, Indiana now shares a priest with another parish, and all of the seminaries I have had association with are no longer standalone entities. While the average age of Americans is now 37, the average age of Episcopalians and their clergy is 57. Very few dioceses are growing today, and internal splits have diminished the size of our denomination.

Yet I am still hopeful about this Church, maybe because of my own experience here at the Cathedral of St. Philip. Certainly we are one of the largest congregations in the denomination, but everywhere I look I see new signs of growth, of spring. Our Cathedral Book Store has started the Book Fellows, which will help provide funding for special programs and insure the future of this independent book store. St. Ruth's Guild, named after our beloved Ruth Vaught, has 45 volunteers of all ages to provide hospitality and food and community gatherings. And once again the Cathedral Antiques Show wowed us with an amazing show, raising hundreds of thousands of dollars for charitable purposes. And every Sunday you come here to worship God in the beauty of holiness—to be inspired and feed and renewed in the worship of God. In a world that is "all about me" Jesus continues to offer us an alternate way of living and imagining. Jesus, the cornerstone of our lives, continues to call us to worship and to service.

One of my favorite quotes is from T. S. Eliot's "Little Gidding" from *The Four Quartets*.

What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning
The end is where we start from.

I plan to take a well-needed sabbatical from church life for a bit, but I imagine that when Savannah finally does become the

place for retirement, I will find a church community to be part of. Because I still believe that the local parish is the center of life in the church, and that we can make a difference in making our communities and our world a more loving and compassionate place.

May God continue to bless you all in this time of endings and beginnings.

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