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## *A Song: In Praise of Parish Ministry*

**A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler  
For St. George's Church, Nashville  
And The Celebration of a New Ministry for the Reverend Malone Gilliam as Rector**

*As you ...are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us (John 17:21). Or, the Beatles' sang it this way in the song, "I Am The Walrus": I am he as you are he and you are me, and we are all together!*

St. Paul responds, *If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation. (2 Corinthians 5:17).*

If I were a better poet, I would title this sermon as an ode, an ode in praise of parish ministry. I sing a song of praise for parish ministry today. I sing for St. George's Church, for sure, and for Malone Gilliam, for sure, but especially for parish ministry. In praise of parish ministry, where God is in Jesus and Jesus is in us and we are in God. In praise of parish ministry, where there is a new creation every day.

Congratulations to St. George's Church! You have searched and found. You have called and assembled. Congratulations to Malone Gilliam!

But maybe more important: Congratulations to all of us, gathered here today, because we are participating in something critical today.

In the midst of so much honorable tradition cracking and crumbling these days, in the midst of trauma and recovery, we are celebrating parish relationship, a community of faith. Parishes are a gift to the world. I want you to know, tonight, that parish ministry is the salvation of the world.

A Song: In Praise of Parish Ministry  
Verse One: Parish Ministry Delivers Grace In The Midst Of Change

There's a story about a young boy who had listened to the new minister's rather long and tedious sermon; he turned to his father and asked what the priest did the rest of the week. His father replied, "Oh, he's busy taking care of church business, visiting the sick and doing other similar work. He also needs to pray and prepare for Sunday, because giving a sermon isn't easy." The little boy responded, "Well, listening to a sermon isn't easy either."

No, none of it is easy. Being a priest is not easy. And being a parish is not easy either. I remember one particular day of my own priesthood, back over thirty years ago. I was serving a small parish about an hour north of Atlanta, Georgia. It was in the country, and we had our problems. Some of us were glad we were in the country; some of us wished we were in the city. My day began with my counseling of a woman who had just lost her husband.

Oh, Sadness! Death is traumatic, and there is no way around it. Yet, death is actually a common thing. Parish priests know this. Parish priests deal with death daily. Parish priests strive to deliver grace in the midst of change, and death is the most major change there is. One definition of a parish priest, indeed one definition of a faithful parish, is that we deliver grace in the midst of change.

Anyway, on that particularly busy day, I then hosted an ecumenical lunch for my fellow Christian pastors in the area. Every one of the churches was a bit more conservative than ours: Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterians,

Roman Catholic. But such is the sensitive nature of true ecumenical work, trying to all be one, as Jesus prayed and as the Beatles sang. For me, it went from patient pastoring to political patience, all in the same day.

And, then, that afternoon, I had an appointment way down in Atlanta. I had not had time to change out of my clerical collar, and I rushed down to catch a MARTA train to the event I planned to attend. The parking would have been impossible. I was on the train with all sorts of rowdy-dressed people. They looked at me, in a priest collar, in a puzzled way. I smiled at them, and I asked: "Are you going to the Rolling Stones concert?" They said, "Yes, they were!" I nodded my head and said, "I am, too." What a day. A little priestly sympathy for the devil. Grace.

There's an old story about a sign outside one parish church that people laughed at. It announced, "Premarital workshop, July 18-19! Grief Recovery, Starts July 21st." Such events are always happening at the same time in a healthy parish. Parish ministry is Christian witness in its most intimate and complicated way. It's tough.

And, yet, parish ministry may be the most critical need in the world today. Change is happening every day in human lives; some of the change is joyful and some of it is not. The world needs parishes who can deliver grace to us.

Amidst all the devilish false equivalences of the world today, amidst all the "either/or," "pass/ fail" notices on our social media devices, the world needs a place where true community is allowed to percolate, and simmer, and cook, and become a beautiful feast. The world wants us to be impatient; parishes teach us to be patient, if we want to celebrate the feast.

The technological world, right now, wants to tell us that our screens are determinative. What we watch determines what we believe and who we are. Flat, two-dimensional decisions all day. Are you for this, or against this? Binary, binary. Flat screens make flat people.

Communities, however,—communities!—are far more gracefully complex. They show us that there is more in life, much more in life, than simply conservative versus liberal, or democrat versus republican, or black versus white. Christian community is graceful.

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Verse Two: Parish Ministry Transmits Tradition

The faithful Christian parish transmits good tradition, long traditions of prayer, music, theology, koinonia, service, justice. Surely, however, we center that tradition on the marvelous Bible.

And, wow, does the Bible tell a series of stories! We enter a different world when we read the Bible. In our present world, like you, I read a lot about misinformation, disinformation, and even "information disorder." I need to be part of something different from what is being shouted out at me in much of contemporary and popular media! I need to read some healthier things!

I need to enter the world of the Bible. We enter a different world when we enter the world of the Bible. It is a series of stories, a wonderfully long and complicated series of stories, stories that interpret each other, even correct each other. In the Bible, we learn about triumph and tragedy, gain and loss, praise and lament – and all these phenomena can be holy.

The Bible is not a rule book. Sure, of course, it has commandments in it, commandments that are worthwhile; but those commandments are not always immediately applicable to every moral challenge we face today. Rather, the Bible is the story of lots of conversations, like family conversations at your Thanksgiving dinner. Your uncle tells a story, and immediately your aunt, says, "No, that's not the way it happened!" Genesis chapter 1, and Genesis chapter 2, for instance, are two entirely different stories! It's as if Jesus was talking one day, and all his disciples were interrupting and talking amidst themselves, and Jesus says, "Hey, listen up. Be quiet and hear what I am saying. When I die, I don't want there to be four different versions of the same story!"

But, of course there are different versions of the same story! The story of God and Jesus and humanity tumbling together into a new creation, a new creation over and over again. That is what Christianity is, and that is what parish ministry replicates. In faithful parishes, over time, the stories of the Bible form real character.

Our world, too, needs the stories of the Bible. The world needs the healthy Christian church, for just these kinds of counter-narratives to the narratives we hear elsewhere. The Church is not just another political party, as

good as some of those parties are. The Church is not just another social club, as good as some of those clubs are. The Church is not just another therapy group, or playground, or school, as good as some of those great institutions are, too. The Church is not just another video or performance, as good as some of those videos and performances are. Rather, the Church is our parish participation in a life that is outside, different from, the life we see around us these days.

The world needs communities of faith who know how to discuss and critique, in faithful relationship. The world needs community Church again –not just video Church, and not just “talking-at-you” Church—because nothing else will be able to satisfy us the way that healthy community does. Over time, the healthy community that is Christian Church, centered in Jesus, inspired by the Spirit, informed by the Bible, with people facing each other openly, in grace and truth, has no comparison. Parishes transmit the rhythms of forgiveness and grace, honest self-knowledge, and honest divine-knowledge, and openness to new life.

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Verse Three: Parish Ministry Shows Us How To Be Priests

Finally, good parishes show us all how to be priests. It's not just the rector and clergy staff who are priests, but all of us. We are all called to be priests today. And what is a priest?

Another definition for “priest,” which I have confirmed over the past several years of the covid pandemic, is that “priests bear people’s burdens.” Conservative or liberal, new or old, priests absorb and bear the burdens of their people. In doing so, we are all saved.

Here is how I was reminded of that definition. We have heard a lot about vaccines in the past several years. We all know by now that vaccines enable our bodies to resist disease, by introducing a very small dose of the disease into our body and thus teaching our body to resist it. With vaccines, when one part of the body learns to resist the disease, the entire body can learn to resist the disease.

It's beautiful science, and the same is true for the spiritual life. Here is what I mean. We are meant to practice the encountering of spiritual disease, too. We are supposed to face the spiritual diseases in our own lives, too, not avoid them. I mean things like greed, envy, hate, bitterness, apathy. Evil. These diseases live inside each of us, even to the smallest degree. The way to defeat them is to learn to acknowledge them, even the slightest touch of them, before they grow into more deadly diseases. Our admission and confession is what can inoculate us from their larger expressions!

Healthy parishes, truth-telling parishes, show us how to do that. And they show us how to do that, for each other, for our own communities that we call the Body of Christ. Every time we bear another person's burden, we are being the vaccine for that other person. Like Jesus, every time we bear another person's burden, we are being a vaccine for that other person. In acknowledging the burdens of that other person, sharing pain and even hearing sin, we are somehow enabling that person, that body, that system, to become healthy.

And when we help that other person to be healthy, even just one other person, we are helping the entire world to be healthy. We are saving the world. Just like an effective vaccine. The word “salvation,” comes from the word “salve,” which means to make well, to make healthy. It's a holy miracle, and parish priests bear those burdens daily. And, in healthy parishes, all of us learn how to be priests. *I am he as you are he and you are me, and we are all together, all together in a new creation every day.*

It's a precious gift, this parish ministry. It is a ministry that feasts every Sunday in the remembrance of forgiveness and grace, which empowers us for love and justice. It is God, God who has given that ministry to Malone Gilliam, and to you, to each of you. Every one of us here today has received the gift of parish ministry. And, gradually, patiently, traditionally, this parish ministry is showing the world how to change gracefully.

AMEN.