

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
January 29, 2023

- Micah 6:1-8
- 1 Corinthians 1:18-31
- Matthew 5:1-12
- Psalm 15

I continue to attempt in my sermons this winter to name or at least get close to naming some of the currents of change that I see in our community and to tie them to our readings in a way that, I hope, can help us navigate these tricky waters a bit better. So, thanks for bearing with me as I experiment a bit with the format.

Some of you will know that I have been away twice in the last three weeks. Once I was just taking some vacation time, wherein I mainly ate food and visited yarn stores. The other trip, though, was for work. I was studying at The General Theological Seminary in New York City, which has served in Manhattan in the Chelsea neighborhood since 1817, preparing priests for ministry. It is an old place that looks like something out of a movie—large trees, arched windows, beautiful brick buildings hung with ivy, nestled in the center of the city. In the middle of the seminary courtyard sits a chapel, whose pews have been shined by two hundred years of sleepy seminarian backsides, saying their morning prayers daily before class begins.

After a long day of lectures, finding myself a little brain-dead from study, I decided to go and light a candle and then sit in the chapel for an hour or so just to hear my own thoughts and hopefully to listen to God. As I sat there, I noticed that all the way around the stone chapel walls were carved Latin words—they lined the walls from the altar, past where the students would sit, around the baptismal font, and all the way back up the other side to the altar again. Now, I don't read any Latin, so they didn't mean much to me, and I assumed they were a psalm or something. I didn't give them any more thought.

A few days later, I was in the chapel again, and again the words carved in stone caught my attention. And this time, I thought perhaps a little Google translate was in order. So I typed in the words to my phone and asked it to translate for me. Lo and behold, I discovered that the words in the walls were the same words that the bishop says as they lay their hands on a priest during her ordination service. At that moment, I understood what the builders of that chapel had envisioned—that generation after generation of students would be formed for their work by literally being surrounded by their ordination prayers day in and day out. For two hundred years, students have felt these words seep into their bones as they prepared to serve God as priests in the church. In English, the prayer begins "Receive the Holy Spirit for the Office and Work of a Priest in the Church of God."

As I sat there, I thought a lot about that old seminary, and I thought a lot about our old church. I know that every level of the Episcopal church has a complex history and an uncertain future. While I was profoundly moved by the prayers cut into the chapel walls, I was also aware that the seminary—for most of its life—only allowed men to attend. That many of those men had fortunes that were won on the backs of slave labor. That the land itself in Manhattan was taken by force from indigenous peoples. The history of the church is complicated and not without its horrors.

And I thought about more recent history in the seminary—crumbling physical plant, declining enrollment, massive mismanagement, and a stubborn unwillingness to see that American Christianity is changing rapidly and that the church—at every single level—will need to change to answer a new call, to do work in a new way. The seminary has gone through a rough couple of years and has made some incredibly hard decisions about staffing, curriculum, physical plant, and finances. (They chose to enter into a partnership agreement with another Episcopal seminary to share resources, and it was a controversial decision that left a lot of people angry with all the changes that happened.) And, now, I think, after a lot of soul searching, they are in a better position to meet the needs of the church than they have been in decades. They have more enrolled students in their hybrid program for fall of 2023 than they've had in years, and they have offered 15 of the new students full scholarships. The seminary I was sitting in found a way to be powerful, flexible, and faithful in this changing religious landscape.

And I see some of those same dynamics here at St. Mark's. I'm really proud that we are asking ourselves some of the hard questions that, in my opinion, some other Episcopal churches are shying away from. What will our ministry look like in the future? How will we be followers of Jesus in a largely electronic age? What do worship, outreach, formation, and fellowship look like across generations? How do we keep the gospel central to our lives in such a noisy and busy world?

As I sat in the chapel, thinking about all the changes that the seminary had to go through, thinking of all the changes that we are going through, I wondered what we would carve into our walls. What words would we want to stand tall around this sanctuary, seeping into our bones? Maybe it would be something from the beatitudes? Blessed are the peacemakers, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Or maybe something from Micah, "Do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with your God." Or maybe better, a question from the baptismal covenant—those questions that we ask at baptism "Will you seek to serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?" "Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?"

You see, when an organization faces a change, it is so easy to be swept up and to forget the foundational reason that the organization exists in the first place. The seminary is there to form priests for God's church. And St. Mark's is here to heal the souls of Christians and then prepare them for lives of service. That was true in 1817, and it's true now. What is carved in our walls doesn't change, even when the world is rapidly changing around us. The words of our baptismal promises anchor us to our Christian identity and to our God. In this season of change, I want us to remember that underneath it all, our purpose is what it always has been. To give succor to the

needy, to worship God in the beauty of holiness, to bear one another's burdens, and to make the world look more like the world of God's imagination. I know there is a lot of change in the church right now. And I know that can be scary. But I can tell you with absolute conviction that God's call to you has not and will not change—not one word. Amen.