

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
February 1, 2024

Well, my friends, most of you will have heard by now that my last Sunday as your priest will be Easter Sunday, March 31. I suppose it is the elephant in the room. The vestry, senior warden, diocese and I are all in conversation about the best next steps, and I know that we will come up with a good plan for the next chapter of your story. It is my hope that in these next eight weeks, we will have the time to cry with one another, to laugh a lot, to mend things that perhaps have been broken over the last eight years, and to continue to focus on the mission of this amazing church. Rectors come and they go, but the mission stays the same.

I want to lift up some things that I have found to be quintessentially St. Mark's over the years as a way to get us into the Gospel story this morning.

1. When I first arrived, apparently some kind of call had gone out to the cooks in the parish that we needed to feed the new priest, which is so nice when you've moved into a new place and your house is filled with boxes, and you don't know where your plates and knives are. And so, for days and days, there were the smells of good food wafting through my house as parishioners brought over different dishes for me and Travis and my mom to eat. We had so much good food that we had to freeze some of it for later. It was sort of like a modern day loaves and fishes, and it just showed me that this is a parish that loves to cook lives and breathes its generosity and its hospitality.
2. There was one Easter when I said, in passing, that it would kind of neat if the baptismal font was filled with flowers on Easter morning. I had read in some book somewhere that some churches put sand in the font during Lent to sort of represent the desert and then have water in the font on Easter morning, and I thought we could do even one better than that. I came in on Easter Sunday and some group of amazing artists in the church had built a tower of flowers that must have been two feet high. I had never seen anything like it, and it just showed me that this parish loves beauty, is creative, and knows how to take an old tradition and to make it your own.
3. I walked into the kitchen on Maundy Thursday a few years ago, and I saw all the cooks preparing for your yearly meal, only, in addition to all the normal herbs and spices and meats that they were preparing, I saw a martini shaker out on the counter, and all the cooks were enjoying cocktails while they prepared for the last supper. And that showed me that this is a parish that is pious but never stuffy.
4. I have never in my entire ministry seen anything like what this parish did in response to the COVID pandemic. Within two days, we were fully online, and we had programming for prayer every day of the week. But then some sort of creative spirit took hold of us, and before you know it, Hunter was leading a pub trivia night, we were enjoying cocktail hour every Thursday at 5 p.m. A new book club came into being, filled with folks who

didn't know one another before the pandemic and even people from out of state, AND every Friday Fr. John Hickey, who hates being called Father, led a film discussion. He showed *A Clockwork Orange*. To church people. And don't forget that we blessed cars with holy water while you all kept up your donations of bottled water and laundry detergent that were needed down at the Hospitality Center in Racine. You walked through art installations—socially distanced—to celebrate Advent and Lent, and you made sure to bury our dead in creative ways, even before the vaccine came into effect. This church actually added members during the pandemic, and if that isn't the holy spirit at work in our community, I don't know what is.

So, what does all this have to do with the Gospel? I'll tell you what I think. In the Gospel story, Simon's mother-in-law is ill, and he asks Jesus to heal her. Jesus agrees, and then the story has a really beautiful few words: the fever left her, and she began to serve. The response to the grace of God is to get to work serving. And if that isn't the core and center of Christianity, I don't know what is.

I think these fevers can come on us in two big ways. Sometimes it's individual. There are so many people in this parish who have come from other places where they were not treated well or where the teachings of the church were rubbing against their lived experience and their values. And they came into these red doors to be healed. I have seen it over and over. And, according to the story, once we are healed, it's time to get to work serving others and serving God.

I also think the fever can be corporate. There was a time shortly after COVID when I think our church had a fever. There was anxiety in the hallways and anger in emails and in our conversations with one another. We had some robust disagreements about process, about how to address the future, about money, and about what was a good answer to God's call to us. It got pretty hard there for a few months. And then, just like with Simon's mother-in-law, I think the fever left us, and we were healed once again.

And so, St. Mark's, as a fully healed and sanctified parish, how are you going to serve? How are you going to serve God, and how are you going to serve one another? I will this season of Lent to wrestle with some of these questions with you. And all of us, as Christians, will have our entire lives to try to answer that questions: how will we serve?

You have been healed, my friends. And we have been healed by a gracious God who comes into our house, into THIS house, to bless us for service. We will have many weeks to figure out how to part well as priest and people. Our time with one another has, as I said in my letter to the parish, the honor of my career. But I'm humble enough to know that our chapter together was just one small one in the much larger story of God's healing presence at St. Mark's over the last 130 years. Please pray for Travis and me. Please pray for one another. And please pray for this remarkable parish. Amen.