

May I speak in the name of the holy, living, and undivided Trinity, one God, now and forever,
Amen.

Good morning!

When I spoke with you last time, you may recall, it was the 2nd Sunday in Easter, and we were on the Road to Emmaus. So I want to pick up where I left off and talk this morning about our congregational life as we journey together on that road.

I'll weave the readings in, but I have been clear for weeks, once I was asked to cover this Sunday, that the Spirit is calling me to talk about us today – our life together as a parish community – during this transitional moment in time that St. Benedict's finds itself in. So that's what I'm going to do.

Now, for anyone who may be here or joining us online for the first time, or who isn't aware, we are as I just said, in a time of transition here as we search for a new priest, or rector.

[If needed: We have had priests filling in for our retired rector, Caro+, but today we don't have one, which means we will not be having Communion; rather, we will have the Liturgy of the Word, which consists of the readings we just heard, the hymns, this sermon, the Confession, the Peace, and the Prayers.]

So I look at this as a really important time, actually. We have taken a lot of time to get ready to search for our next rector; we have assessed who we are, where we've been, what our strengths are, what our hopes are, what our needs are, what we would like more of, what we might like a little less of, and it has helped us understand more deeply who we are, in relation to one another, and as the Body of Christ.

So while we are an outwardly-focused parish, often engaged in the needs of the world beyond these walls, I think sometimes we need to take care of ourselves a bit - to put our own oxygen mask on, as it were - before attempting to assist others. So while my sermons also are often focused on interpreting the readings and being attentive to the needs of the world, today I feel a call, as I said, to offer us some pastoral support, so that's what I'm going to try to do.

And I believe that this period of transition is actually galvanizing us! I find myself, over and over, interpreting this as a time of opportunity for us to discover, or really realize, that we are not dependent on clergy in order to do ministry; our ministries are ongoing, people are stepping up, and we are continuing to gather in this space to worship and be energized by and through and in Christ.

Yes, it is true, we remain Eucharistically-centered, and we do need a priest in order to celebrate the Holy Communion; but then I thought, even the loss of that this morning helps us to understand a little more deeply how central, how important, the Eucharist is to our worship. When something becomes rare, scarce, or more difficult to obtain, it does tend to become that much more precious to us, doesn't it?

So this is my job, actually; this is what I do in hospice – I transform seemingly sad, difficult times into times of gratitude and deeper awareness and understanding. When a spouse, a child, or loved one is bereft, we recognize it's a result of the deep love that was present in that relationship.

It may seem strange to think of utter despair or inconsolable grief as a sign I look for when someone is grieving, but in doing so, I've come to understand it's actually for many of us the primary goal in life, the greatest thing we ever were a part of: to love another person so deeply,

or feel the love of someone so deeply, that we're utterly inconsolable when they die. Because the only other option is a love that wasn't so deep, and trust me, I see plenty of that as well. So if ever I ask, "would you rather have had it any other way while they were here?", the answer is invariably no.

And here's where I can weave in the first reading, because imagine you loved someone as deeply as Jacob loved Rachel, and imagine being deceived like that. Think about the depth of that deception and the despair it would cause in the context of our own life – you're in love with one, but now find you've been tricked and you're with another – and how that might feel. Now there's a bible study! Which of course is another ministry!

So I am seeing this time we are in here not as some wayward, barren moment, where we are confused, wandering, lost in the desert and hoping to get to the next stage, but more as an opportunity to recognize that this time might be empowering us as we step up with greater awareness of, and perhaps take even greater responsibility for our various ministries, confident that if we do so, St. Benedict's will attract the priest we are seeking, or perhaps better put, the priest that God is seeking for us, seeking to connect us with.

Now not everyone sees their work as ministry. I learned this back in VT, and I have a story to tell you. We had a new parishioner; St. Peter's, VT; probably didn't feel that connected; roof was leaking into the organ pipes, so it was serious; very dangerous, high, steep, slate roof; he got up there and found and patched the leak to get us through to the spring; I thanked him for his ministry, but he didn't see it that way "that's not ministry, I just fixed a hole in the roof"; it was in the parish office and others were there, so we talked about all the ministries that help the church function; this led him to hand-carve a beautiful new wooden sign for the front lawn. So, a beautiful outcome, but also a lesson that everything here, whether it's altar guild, sprinklers,

solar panels, or shrubs....or simply loading or emptying the dishwasher.... it's all ministry, contributing to the life of this church.

And I'm aware, as we all are, that we've got some challenges as well. I'm aware that ministries we once enjoyed can become draining or burdensome; often, our strengths or passions can change over time. I know for myself, I always try to pay attention to whether something feels nourishing as I'm doing it, or whether it's draining me emotionally and spiritually. If so, it may be time for a change. But it's important to remember, those stresses and strains are always present, whether we have a rector or not.

We must also be conscientious with and considerate of each other, especially when it comes to our ministries. If we have taken on a role or responsibility, we need to make sure we are being attentive to that work and the people we are working with. If you are having a difficult time, please let us know. Maureen is our presiding warden, Rev Jen can perhaps offer some insight and pastoral counsel; and as many of you know, I can provide a non-judgmental and supportive listening ear.

Sometimes, though, we take one for the team. I'm not great at committees and meetings, but I agreed to serve on the parish council. I won't go into all the reasons for that, but let's just say I said no several times before finally agreeing to take that ministry on, and I'm glad I did. But sometimes we do make sacrifices for the sake of this community we hold so dear.

So this is where I want to tie in the opening verses from Paul's letter. This is one of those verses that needs to be imprinted folks; we need to carry this around with us and utilize it when we are under stress or pressure. Read first verse. "The Spirit helps us in our weakness" is a promise!

So if we find ourselves struggling, let us remember that the Spirit is interceding for us with sighs too deep for words; but here's the kicker: we need to take that time to pray in order to become aware that we are receiving that prayer from the Spirit. And doesn't that transform our understanding of prayer, not as something going out from us, because, apparently, we don't know how to pray, but as something that is coming in to us, from the Divine.

The truth is that our life together in Christ is palpable in this place. I'm not going to list all the ministries because I will leave some out and there are ones I'm sure I don't even know about; but we hear about them in the announcements, many of them are listed in the bulletin, we read about them in our weekly and bi-monthly Benediction newsletters (which themselves are all important ministries), we experience and enact these ministries out in the community, and we are surrounded by them – they are literally wrapped around us, enveloping us – as we worship here.

And here for me is the connection to the parable of the net from today's gospel lesson. I think at St. Ben's we do a good job of understanding and incarnating Jesus' teaching that the kingdom of heaven is like a net that is cast into the sea and catches everything in its path; everyone and everything is part of the kingdom of heaven; we do not do the sorting, but we understand that we are traveling together with all of it and we are ministering to and with all of it as we go, with a focus or emphasis on the poorer and more marginalized parts of that kingdom, as we follow the teaching and example of Jesus.

Another interesting thing I noticed a few weeks ago – and this is a bit confessional, but I find I've actually been making a more concerted and deliberate effort to try and get here physically on Sunday mornings. I think when we have a rector, we can perhaps get lulled into that sense that church is going to happen whether we're here or not; but I noticed I was feeling a greater responsibility to be here now, because if we don't show up, then the church truly won't be here.

So again, this is another example of how being honest, confronting, and examining ourselves and what we might perceive as a difficult time, or a time of loss, can transform our understanding and awareness of this time into gratitude and something positive with which to move forward.

And finally, I want to focus on our relationships with one another. It was Rev Jen actually, with what I like to call those “fresh from seminary eyes” that articulated this so insightfully to me: we need to work on building our relationships with one another. When Caro+ was here, our relationships with each other often ran through her; she was often the link between us. Now, we must work to forge those relationships with each other if we are to grow and deepen those bonds.

For as we do this, we will come to understand and remember more deeply that we are Christ-centered, not rector or priest-centered. Our ministry revolves around the Living Christ; it does not depend on the presence of a rector in order to function. In fact, this is a time when the phrase, “the priesthood of all believers” really swoops in and takes hold of us. And so this is where the well-known final verse from Paul’s letter swoops in as well, because it’s that reassurance, that neither death, nor life..which is why it’s part of the church’s end of life prayers and funeral liturgy, that nothing in all creation, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The Good News is we’re doing it. This is an amazing church; our ministries reach far and wide into the local community and beyond; and every member is a vital part of the Body of Christ.

And together with God, we will not only make it through this time, but we will flourish; because with God, all things are possible. Amen