

One Flock, One Shepherd

It seems like I only just got here as your seminarian, and here we are this morning at another good-bye in the life of St. James. Is it just me, or does it feel to you like the past few years of our life together have been filled with good-byes, with changes, with transitions?

I remember my first day at St. James, about five years ago. I was visiting the seminary and your senior seminarian at that time, Liz Munoz, who was also from my diocese, insisted that as a gay man from Los Angeles that St. James would be the best place for me to live, love, and grow into my priestly vocation while in seminary.

Sunday of that visitor's weekend rolled around, and I showed up at this funky old building on MLK Boulevard. As I was walking in, I was impressed by the diversity of people coming in to the building compared to what I had seen at the seminary. But then I was overwhelmed by the... weirdness... of that building. I was put off-center: I came in through the old parish hall and couldn't get a handle on where the center aisle was—for some reason I was disoriented, a little lost, and not quite settled until the liturgy began. Then I settled into then rector Greg Rickel's message and soon was able to feel the joy and love that was so evident in the congregation around me at the peace—it was clearly a family that loved and cared for each other.

That seems like so long ago to me. We've said goodbye to that funky old building that was so cared for and loved. We've said good-bye to Greg. We've said goodbye to a number of beloved people in the congregation, loved ones who have moved away, and other loved ones who have died.

Less obvious is the good-bye we've had to say to the kind of congregation that dwelled at the building on MLK Boulevard. Through God's grace, we've grown, and when any congregation grows from the size we were then to the size we are now, some of the intimacy seems to get lost because we don't know everybody anymore and we have to find new ways of relating. By definition, when we go through this change we don't relate as a family anymore but as several congregations and groups under one roof, bound together now in a different way.

That happens in any parish that discerns a call to grow and lives into it. But when a parish doesn't have a traditional center, like St. James, then growth adjusts that center. The racial and demographic shifts of growth push us. From listening, it sounds as if there aren't uniform thoughts in

the parish about what to do about these changes, but there are universal feelings of anxiety that something is changing.

Who we are *now* is not who we *were*, and it sometimes seems difficult to fully value “us as we are now” without seeming to devalue “us as we were then.” It’s especially scary when we’ve already had to say so many goodbyes and make so many other changes.

Dealing with all of these changes, this grief, is the primary task of interim ministry. Creating a space for that grief and talking through all these dynamics is what Jeffrey and I have spent a lot of our time in my supervision discussing. I am so glad to have had time with him, and with Bill, and with Greg as supervisors in my time here. Each of them has taught me so much. Jeffrey has especially gone out of his way to do wonderful things for me.

We are not in that funky old building at MLK anymore, but we do have a heritage carrying from our life in that place and from the campus at Huston-Tillotson before it. Just as I was unable to find the center of the worship space on my first day and experienced some disorientation, St. James’ heritage requires that the center of our common life be a place of growth not just a place of comfort; a place that pushes us and isn’t always easy; it is a tradition centered in the African-American experience and you have taught me that living into the heritage of this parish requires some of us to do more listening than talking, some to learn new sensitivities and others to take new risks. From that heritage, we also ask each other, whether white or black, male or female, gay or straight, to make a shift towards vulnerability, away from dominance.

While every single one of us here *could* go to a monocultural church, none of us is doing it today. But *attending* a multicultural church and moving to a place of receptiveness and vulnerability are two different things, and trying to keep those two things in tandem as we go through these other many transitions is not easy. Change pushes our buttons, triggers grief, denial, anger, and anxiety, and makes us not want to stay vulnerable but to assert some kind of control. In the midst of it all, it is easy to say either, “I want out—I’m not getting what I need anymore” or to say, “It’s not working—we’ve got to push harder,” tempting us to trade radical hospitality and invitation for restricting the boundaries of who is welcome.

But that isn’t what you are doing. Transitions, good-byes, and changes may make it feel as if our center gets pushed further than we’d like—and they do cause us to stretch and grow and hurt. But this is a parish that is accustomed to a funky-kind of center; one that looks different from where the rest of the world expects it to be, a parish that, in the words of Eric Law, operates on the assumption that

“there is always an abundance of God’s grace, so we can be secure enough to open our boundaries to include others,” and we haven’t forgotten it.

In today’s gospel, Jesus says, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.” You have taught me in my time here that your identity as a parish exists not to serve just one fold of the flock, but to live in that place where Jesus brings together different folds, making them a single flock, all under one shepherd. This flock has a different and unexpected center. And by living in that place, in that flock of so many different and interesting sheep, in that intersection of different points of view, different experiences, of vulnerability—you challenge and help each other to live into God’s love, not only in word or speech, but as our Epistle today says, by living into truth and action.

I want to share with you some of my observations in watching and learning from you over these past few years. It seems to me that there are at least three ways that St. James’ common life demonstrates God’s love lived through truth and action, ways that you have lived into your mission through your grief amidst all these transitions when you could have turned away.

First, you are unafraid to speak the truth. Throughout my tenure here, you have called each other to share your perspectives on racism and its effects on the world individually, socially, culturally and systemically. In calling each other to dialogue on such a difficult topic, you learn from each other a way of gathering truth by allowing the Holy Spirit to work among you collaboratively. It allows those like me, born into a certain power and privilege because of my skin color, to learn how to use our voices to raise up other voices that have not historically been heard: voices of color, of women, of the poor. As a gay man, I can also say that it is a liberating experience to be in this environment. You give courage and power to voices that haven’t been heard to speak out in solidarity. These experiences work towards the gospel of liberation and justice.

Second, you work actively in the world, seeing a brother or sister in need and giving help. With ministries like Mobile Loaves and Fishes, the Trinity Center, and the East Austin Wellness Initiative, you work with each other as one flock, leveraging your differences in order to do the work you are called to do. You remain mission-focused, knowing that Church is not about your own personal existential fulfillment, but that your fulfillment is linked directly to the betterment of the world and vice-versa.

Finally, you continue to open yourselves, making yourselves vulnerable, through radical hospitality, to newcomers. This is no easy task in a world that does not live as you do. In a church which does not live the way the dominant culture does, there is always a fear that the culture can invade. But

you choose hospitality over border-control. You choose the way of the cross over the way of the empire. You understand that risking relationship is the only way to continue the journey, to grow, to learn, and to transform each other and the world. You understand that Jesus is the shepherd, and he takes care of the flock—so our trust must be placed in him to fend off the dangers. The Good Shepherd allows you to be inviting and allows you to graciously open your lives to others, and you know that it is in this grace alone that the wolf shall lie with the lamb. You know that it can only happen with trust in the Shepherd.

On this point, let me relay an experience from a seminary professor, as I was talking to him about our congregation. He said, “what jumps out in my mind when I think of St. James is the Peace. That seems to be the embodiment of that parish.” I think he is right. Your faith, the faith that enables all of these things we’ve been speaking of—is made incarnate in our exchange of the peace. You welcome each other and newcomers in that liturgical space. You exchange the peace, as far as I can tell, with people that are alike and dissimilar from you. You exchange the peace with fellow parishioners who you may not even like. Of course this is what it is all about. Living in community with those who aren’t all the same as you, so that you can see those things you are blind to and show others where they can grow, and doing it in peace.

One final thought. It is easy to look at this congregation and be proud of what we’ve done. I too love this place and you all and I hope I’ve played some small role in it these past few years. But when I look at what is happening here, I think there is something different going on than what we’ve made. I look around here and I see only one answer for what is happening. The Good Shepherd is here: God is present in this place, with us, guiding and shepherding us in this journey. I think that is much more powerful and awesome a gift and responsibility than us having done everything ourselves. That is not something to forget; the stewardship of such a gift is to be treasured and discerned carefully. I think we must give praise for such an awesome treasure.

I have loved sharing this part of the journey with you. I’ll be in Austin for another year, but because my role has changed there are some good reasons why the seminary asks that I find another place to worship. But I’ll be around from time to time, and I can’t wait to see where the Good Shepherd takes you next. As you wait for his rod to gently find a new center for St. James whatever that may be, remember that green pastures and still waters await.