

# Sermon

All Saints' Episcopal Church

The Rev. Dr. Simon Mainwaring

Gospel Reading: John 6:56-69

26 August 2018



About 18 months ago I was worshipping at All Saints' under very different circumstances. I had just spent three days that felt like two or three weeks with members of the vestry as a final candidate for rector of this parish. It had been an enjoyable yet rather exhausting time, and I had attended so many meetings and breakfasts and lunches and dinners over those couple of days that when the concierge at the hotel we were staying at looked like he wanted to have a heart to heart conversation I think he could see the look of 'no way, no how', in my eyes.

In truth, I had loved it all, and was beginning to fall in love with this church which my predecessor described to me as the most wonderful parish in the world, and with every week that passes as rector here, I see more and more of why. Given how much I was falling for the place, it was with some hesitation that I took the vestry up on their offer to worship with y'all on a Sunday morning. 'Dress in your civilian clothes, act normal, and don't speak to anyone', I think were my orders. Thank you, Ken Stewart, for putting my mind at rest.

Any of you who know the church and its clergy will know very well by now that there is nothing normal about a priest trying to blend in, in the pews on a Sunday morning. We are too fast on the page numbers, we begin the prayers too well, and being the experts on every matter we are not currently preaching on, we wince too often when the priest in the pulpit says something asinine. Anyway, I got through the service more or less, nervous that somebody would blow my cover as I made my way up to the altar rail for communion with a knowing wink or a random shake of my hand, but they didn't: the vestry and search committee were consummate performers in pretending they had never seen me before.

All in all, then, it looked to be going well. I was sat at the back, ready to make my exit right at the close of the final hymn, and then the choir came, which was usual, and then formed a tight circle around the back of the church, which was not so usual. What was worse than now being trapped inside the church I was really needing to slip out of by now, the entire congregation had now turned around facing the open door I would now have to shoulder charge an entire row of altos to get to, arousing the suspicion that not only had my cover been blown, but now the entire church wanted to know what on earth I was doing worshipping with them when this rector search thing was all supposed to be anonymous.

Well, I did manage to escape, no words spoken, just a quick flash of a smile followed by a brisk walk to the hotel, avoiding all eye contact with the concierge as I went. It's funny how we see things when we don't now what to expect. Now I look at you, this congregation I am so privileged to serve, from a different seat in the house, turning to the world beyond and it paints for me such a beautiful image of the church we already are and are called to be.

Today we will share your vestry's vision for how we might continue to build on the incredible legacy of years gone by of life together on this block and grow to be even more a people who will turn to one another and to the world that does lie beyond these doors. That strategic plan for mission has a lot of wonderful ways forward for us to walk in, but at its heart, it seeks to come to know, love and serve our neighbors, the neighbors we see already sitting next to you in our pews today and who are part of our parish family; and the neighbors we have yet to meet and be enriched by.

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I'll share more about that in the forum this morning, yet it is striking how very well our scriptures this morning help us to consider our orientation to one another and to the world around us in a couple of beautiful ways.

In Solomon's prayer of dedication for the first Jerusalem Temple which we heard in our first reading, reminds us that all that we have to treasure in the life of this our worshipping community is to be held in trust, not only for us but for all who will come after us. For Solomon, whilst the place where God's name shall dwell is to be a sacred center of life for the people of Israel, the king is also minded to ask God to hear the pleas of those who come from distant lands. Time and again, this story of one, chosen people of God in the nomads turned settler Hebrews is reworked in the biblical tradition to be the story also of the nations, those who have yet to hear that they too are the beloved of a living God.

As much as this prayer of Solomon looks like a prayer for the dedication of a place for worship, I believe its gift is more truly as a prayer for how the Israelites and by extension how we might dedicate ourselves. Think of this glorious temple of our own, here on North Avenue and West Peachtree. If the prayer of Solomon is to be our framework, then must we not also believe that this place for worship stands today not only for us, but for those for whom churches like this are as foreign; strange places with stranger words and actions? What might our prayer be for them? How might our orientation to the world around us be a Solomon orientation; inclined to look for ways for newness to enter our midst in the form of those whom we have yet to call friends in the life of this parish?

Solomon's prayer of dedication, then, helps us to imagine how we might look outward, to the stranger to come into our midst. For the church in Ephesus that we of in our second reading, our encouragement is for how we might look inward, and the work we will have to do to be ready for the guest when we meet them.

I wonder if you are struck as I am with the sheer irony of the armor of God imagery that we heard in Ephesians this morning. I have often thought that the Headmaster of my elementary school was a fan of the Epistle to the Ephesians. The only advice I can ever remember that man giving us was that if another child in school tried to beat us up, we should take the better path and simply smile at them, lovingly. He was wrong. In fact, my experience was that if John Smith was intent on beating the living daylights out of me, believe me, flashing him a loving smile only made matters a whole lot worse. Having engaged in a fair amount of rough and tumble in my earlier years, it was something of a shock to discover later in life that my then headmaster was not in fact deranged, but a Christian. The armor that those kind of folks gear up with to face the world is not unstoppable force, but truth, and righteousness, and faith, and the spirit of peace.

Our inward work, therefore, is to take what we have mistaken for power - our money, our social standing, our beauty, our bodily ability - and lay it aside for the in-dwelling of real power, the sort of power we see when we look at the cross of Christ Jesus, the power that gives itself away and so in its refusal to be forceful is capable of real transformation. It seems like an impossible ask for us to make, yet until in this walk of faith we learn to give ourselves away, we will have little to offer the stranger who makes their way to find us here. Unless we have been found by the God who gives Godself away for us, we will never be findable for those who may seek to know that God for themselves.

That is perhaps the great inconvenience of the Christian faith, that as much as we profess the utter primacy of God, given the fact of the incarnation, that God dwells in us as he dwells in Jesus, we are not left with an option of living a life of passivity if that life is to be faithful. If we are to be raised with Christ in our baptism, argues Paul, then we must die with him. If we are to be lifted up, then we must first be emptied out. To gain a world, we must lose it.

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It's a wonder that anyone ever continued to walk the way with Jesus, amazing that the twelve didn't just turn on their heels and follow the rest of the disciples who found Jesus' invitation just too hard to accept. Yet they did, and so we are here, a living remnant of that first hope. 'To whom else can we go?' is Peter's appeal. Where else does the water actually quench the thirst you and I have been feeling since our very first day?

It's a calling to be sure, not to be great, or to be right, or to be good at any of this, but to be real, to one another and to ourselves, facing the world to welcome it in, following a Savior who has nothing less to give than the way of a transformational self-donating love.

So as we prepare in word and song to turn once more to face the world as our worship ends, I invite each of us here and all who will come here because of the gift of God's unending grace, to trust that the one who made the world we turn to, will be faithful. 'To whom can we go', asks Peter? To the one who calls all of us on. Amen.

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