

‘Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ²In my Father’s house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. ⁴And you know the way to the place where I am going.’ ⁵Thomas said to him, ‘Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?’ ⁶Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.’

“And you know the way to the place where I am going.” I think that one of the unhealthiest practices a priest can employ in his or her preaching is comparing themselves to Jesus. Not only is it annoying, but I think, in every case, it is unfair and unhealthy for a priest to assume the imagined role of Jesus. Fortunately for me, and perhaps much to your chagrin, I am not a priest. You see where this is going, don’t you?

In this morning’s Gospel lesson, Jesus is once again addressing the 12 disciples. But it is not the typical interaction between Jesus and the disciples to which we have become accustomed. Jesus is not working with the disciples in parsing out a parable. He is not protesting the establishment, turning over tables. He is not performing any great miracle. He has just finished washing the disciples’ feet. And Jesus is saying goodbye. He is saying goodbye to a group of friends who have been present with him on his journey, friends who have supported his ministry, often patiently. And friends who have even wondered, at times, why exactly he was there in the first place. So it is to this extent, and to this extent only, that I compare today’s Gospel lesson with this occasion; my last sermon as the seminarian at Christ & Holy Trinity.

For the past two academic years, this parish has supported my ministry as a seminarian-intern. Often times I’m sure you have wondered why exactly I was here, or what exactly I was doing. But throughout my time, you have been kind, you have been welcoming, and you have been patient. For that, I want to thank you. Because of my time here, I am prepared in ways I never imagined to take the next step on my journey in ordained ministry. And it is my experiences here that allow me to confidently say, in the words of today’s Gospel, “You know the way to the place where I am going.”

You know the way to the place where I am going. I say that, most sincerely, because you all have showed me the way to the place where I am going. You have allowed me to come into your church and worship with you. You have allowed me to teach your children, and lead your discussion groups. You have allowed me access to the time, energy and experience of your staff and volunteers. And, you have allowed me to preach to you from your pulpit.

“You know the way to the place where I am going.” You have shown me what it means to be part of a Christian community of faith. You have prepared me to step into my role within that community. And while I am thankful for everything you have done to show me the way to the place where I am going, I would be remiss if I didn’t acknowledge that I was also scared. Now, I don’t mean scared about taking the next step in my journey, though I do carry a certain amount of healthy excitement and anxiousness about it. No, my fear is that others will not have the opportunity to be shown the way. My fear is that the vast wealth of resources and experiences found in this parish will be lost on the next generation of Episcopal clergy.

As the financial and logistical costs of being a seminarian continue to increase, I am fearful that fewer and fewer of my peers will answer calls to ordained ministry. If this happens, the church will continue to find itself in our current situation of having to largely rely on second and third career clergy who can finance their own way through seminary. To be sure, these folks are equally capable of ministry and often bring a wealth of experiences that can only be gained through time. However, this model of supplying priests for our congregations cannot sustain itself.

The average age of an Episcopal priest is around 59 years old. More than a quarter of our priests are over 66 years old. Fewer than 7 percent are 35 years old or younger. Now I don’t bring this up because I am against people with

established families and careers pursuing ordained ministry. I believe people in all ages and stations in life can receive authentic calls to follow God in all sorts of ways. I bring it up because as Christians, we are always called to be a forward-looking people. We see that in this morning's Gospel, especially in the uncertainty of the disciples. "What's going to happen to us?" they ask. "Where are we going next?" "How are we going to get there?" Jesus replies by saying, "the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these." We are called to continue doing the work of Christ, always looking forward.

Jesus has gone ahead to prepare a place for us in God's eternal Kingdom. But in the meantime, we are called to serve as an icon of God's generous and inclusive love in the world. It is the same undeserved generous hospitality that we will enjoy at the Lord's Table this morning. Now, I'm not one to confuse being the church with being followers of Jesus, but until a better model is developed, I don't know how else to go about intentionally facilitating the work we are called to do in Christian community. I don't know how else to do what it is we do!

The scope and integrity of the ministry of Christ & Holy Trinity has shown me that this is a place that takes Jesus' command to go out and do greater works very seriously. It has not only given me a better understanding of who you are as a community of faith, but it has given me a better understanding of who I am. And it has given me a better understanding of who or what God is.

I don't bring up this topic to end my time here on a sour note. I bring it up because I think that as Christians we are called to be honest about who we are and where we are going. We, like Thomas in this morning's Gospel, are invited to say "how" "where"? And we are invited to name those fears with one another. I don't know what exactly the solution is, but I am certain about one thing; we won't find a solution until we acknowledge that it is a problem, and can have faithful and spirit-led discussions about it.

If I am blessed to work until retirement, I look forward to close to 40 years of ordained ministry in the Episcopal Church. A career whose foundation will be built on my experiences here, at Christ & Holy Trinity, Westport. You all know, and have shown me the way to the place where I am going. It is my prayer that this parish will continue to show the way to generations of others preparing for a life of work and ministry among you. Thank you, and AMEN.