

Sermon 1-23-11 “Retirement Celebration”

A little boy doesn't know what to say to an octogenarian priest leaving his church, and so he says, “Sir, I hear you're tired.” Well, not exactly! There are days like that, but I've retired before. So I see today as much to celebrate what's ahead for both you and me, as it is also to look back with warmth and appreciation for the five plus years we've had together at St. James'. Thanks very much, Cindy, for giving me the opportunity to do that today!

Yes, I've done this retirement sequence before, and it can even be refreshing. Some years ago I was the clergy representative on the governing board of the National Cathedral and its partner schools. When my term expired and Bishop Haines was presenting me with the traditional letter- opener and pen gifts he said, “Elton, you've retired more times around here than anyone else!” It was my third retirement out of five during the nearly ten years that I served the National Cathedral in various capacities. And those five retirements followed my “official” retirement, at age 65, after 26 years as Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in Buffalo, New York.

As they say, “ wait! There's more!” Now it's time to celebrate another period of retirement as I leave St. James'. My first acquaintance with St. James' was on January 9, 2005 when I was invited to preach here as Cindy took a rare Sunday away after Christmas. That was right after the devastating Tsunami in Southeast Asia, and my sermon dealt a lot on how one deals with catastrophes in life. That led to other times to preach and fill in here that spring and summer, and then to accepting in September a “second clergy” position that was new in the parish.

For those whose memories of St. James' go back as far as 2005 you will remember that the congregation was then coming out of a very difficult time, mostly revolving around some members' response to national church decisions. The parish was treading water with morale and expectations in a holding pattern. Now fast forward five years and we see a new spirit and attitude here.

Think about it. There have been concerns and questions about our new fall schedule but this has not slowed things down. The important thing to note is that there is now a momentum and spirit in the parish that can sustain and grow from and through the changes St. James' has made this fall. It has been a joy to see this happening and to know that I shared in helping to recover the kind of spirit and leadership that opens up new possibilities here. This is a changed parish from the one I remember in 2005.

As we celebrate this morning I think about lay people who have made a difference in the life of St. James' in these years. There are dozens that I think of immediately, many who are right here this morning, but I hesitate to single them out. However let me mention Bob Graf, a choir member and our first webmaster, who died just over a year ago. If I wanted to know quickly who was a new visitor in the congregation all I had to do was watch Bob and I knew he would be down in the congregation after the service welcoming that person. Then I would follow Bob to that person. From such experiences like that of welcoming to newcomers I saw an expectation of parish growth emerging into our life here.

And as I prepared my sermons, if I was pondering how clear I was in making my points and keeping attention, I would think

about Bob, and visualizing him or someone like him, listening carefully and pondering to himself—“yes—but.” After the service I would wait until he saw me later and said, “yes—but” or “yes—and then what?” I am grateful for all the Bob Grafs in this congregation who are seeking and searching for life-hooks in the sermons we preach here. I have always considered preaching as a two-way street. I hope it is always a time for feeding our spirits.

And, looking back and forward this morning, thanks to you and the impressive growth in your annual financial giving since 2005, St. James is now able to plan ahead with more confidence in the future. Some of that is due to the months of behind-the-scenes preparation of attention-getting messages that have stressed the importance of measuring your church pledge as a proportion of your personal income.

Along with other responsibilities, I was one person in a small committee every year who spent weeks preparing those messages to you. In all this I perceived my role in that group as a cheer leader and coach, helping to inspire good people onto new levels in their creative planning and performance. We helped raise the level of giving responses—and at the same time we had fun doing it!

I still remember one of my mentors in that kind of role in my ministry—my choirmaster at St. Paul’s Cathedral back in Buffalo. I knew that we were going to be outstanding when I heard a member of the girls’ choir after a rehearsal saying “gee, I didn’t know we could be that good!” That kind of inspirational style is what I tried to help model here at St. James’ through these years.

So then what's ahead now for you and for me? Obviously I don't know the answer on that, but the direction it should take is in the gospel reading this morning. Simon Peter and his brother Andrew are fishermen, casting their nets into the sea. Jesus comes along and says, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers for people!" "Follow me" is a theme of invitation constantly recurring as Jesus' ministry opens up: "Come and see" he says. "Go and do likewise", he says. Have you ever thought about how often Jesus' words are words of invitation?

Probably many of you remember as I do the musical "Fantastics" and the unforgettable song in it--"Try To Remember" If I were Cindy or Newton or a choir member I could sing it this morning. "Try to remember the kind of September when the grass was green and the grain was yellow"---and then it ends with the lyrics "Follow, Follow, Follow, Follow" ...and the word "follow" keeps on going as the music fades away.

Think about it. Jesus was always calling on people to follow him. After I graduated from college I didn't know what I was going to do with my life, and I discovered the spirit of Jesus Christ alive in a parish church and I said "yes" to following a path that for me was to ordination and parish ministry rather than to law school.

Now I am at another turning point in my life, and St. James' is at a very important turning point in its life as well. The spirit-filled word "follow" is what keeps me going, and keeps St. James' going, through all the decades of changes in our lives and ministries.

“Follow!” I still hear that word as I listen to God’s call for my next steps ahead. As an octogenarian, I am a young man compared to people like Irving Berlin who lived to be 101. He wrote the World War I tune “Over There, Over There” and “God Bless America “ and “White Christmas”-- In fact, he wrote over 1000 songs and was still writing to the end. He never stopped making music and thinking about the next song. When asked about that he responded, “Well, I ask myself, am I going to be a crabby old man or am I going to write another song?”

**I think I know my answer to such a question as I look ahead this morning. I still hear Jesus’ words “follow me” ringing in my ears. We all need to hear them if the grass is going to stay green and the grain stay yellow: “follow,”...”follow....”
“follow”AMEN**