

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

What is a parish church? Is it like a family? Is it like the Body of Christ? Is it like that vineyard which Isaiah describes? Can we tell when a parish is being dysfunctional? Can we tell when it is bearing good fruit? Is it necessary for us to gather together physically at some appointed hour on some particular day of the week? Is there still such a thing as the Sabbath day? Or is that an old fashioned concept? Is it important for us to celebrate sacraments together in person? Are our weekday lives nourished by such gathering? What are our expectations, and are they reasonable? And no, I'm not just beginning another long and random list of questions like I posed last week. These, and others like it, are questions your leadership must constantly ask, but again, they are questions for which there are no quick and easy answers. They are questions we need to live with and keep asking. They are supposed to be questions which your priest, at least, should love asking. And BTW, I do. And, personally, I am regularly guided in the asking of these questions by you dear people.

Yesterday was the eighth anniversary of my ordination as a priest in the Episcopal Church USA. The picture on the cover of your bulletin this morning was on the booklet we used that evening at the ordination liturgy. It's meant to be the sunrise over Owasco Lake at Casowasco Retreat center, framed with the grid from the leaded windows looking out over the lake. I had a personal connection with that sacred space since childhood, including both my original call to ministry and my Cursillo weekend. Many of you have heard those stories, and I won't repeat them now, but they are beloved to me and I'm always happy to share them if you want to ask about them. But on that August evening in 2014, as Bishop Skip Adams went to lay his hands on me during the ordination ritual, I must tell you I had hoped to feel great and magical empowerment rush through my very veins. And indeed I was appropriately moved by the gesture and stirred by the Holy Spirit. But, to be perfectly honest, my foremost emotion was one of angst instead of reassurance. First of all, I don't really like being the center of attention. It embarrasses me. It makes me wonder what people are *really* thinking about me, like I can hear their whispers behind my back. And second of all, I have all these darn questions!! Here wardens John Reinhardt and Peter Dwyer had invited me to apply for the position here at St. John's, and I was still full of secret questions! Do you think they expect me to have all the answers, too?! Eight years later, I still have questions...I still don't know where all the light switches are, for God's sake! But I have learned to love the questions. They keep me curious and involved and just off-balance enough to want to grow, even as I make mistakes along the way.

That evening I felt like a fledgling who had been sheltered in that comfortable nest of "formation" and training for seven years and now was expected to fly on my own. I had been through all the diocesan discernment, all the Commission on Ministry interviews, all 28 seminary courses, all the hospital pastoral training, the dreaded Ordination Exams, and now Skip was telling me that I myself could fly low and close with the Spirit's assistance. Oh, the angst of stepping out of the nest into mid-air, without a net! If I took that position at St. John's, I knew I would have big shoeprints to fill: Beverly Messenger-Harris, Dick Hamlin, Alan Smith, Jim Heidt...all Pastors whom I knew and admired for their piety, their dedication, their preaching, and their organizational skills. Now, I knew I couldn't imitate them, that I would have to authentically just be myself, but would that be enough? And then that evening the dear people of this parish presented to me a prayer quilt, knots thoughtfully and prayerfully tied, which included in its panels one which quoted a favorite line from Paul's Letter to the Philippians: "I can do all things through Christ

which strengthens me.” I have often found reassurance and encouragement in that verse. But then, was it just wishful thinking?

Uncomfortable and as challenged as I may have been that evening eight years ago, the truth is that it wasn't about just me. Bishop Adams had written a page to be included in the ordination service bulletin, and with your permission I'd like to read it to you: “We rejoice today that Arthur “Nick” Smith has responded to a sacred call to the ordained life. After a long period of discernment, preparation, and affirmation, we arrive together at this moment of celebration, both in our liturgy and in the fellowship to follow. But what exactly are we celebrating? What is being ordained within the person who will now become and serve as a priest in the church? What do we believe is happening when we invite the Holy Spirit to be present at the laying on of hands during the consecration? After all, the Holy Spirit has always been, is always, and will always be, fully present in each of us. So, what is different about today? What do we believe about the sacrament of ordination to the priesthood?

Simply put (he went on): We are asking God to ordain within Nick the priesthood of *all* persons. As Christians we celebrate this truth in baptism. So we ask God to set him apart, not as someone more special or more deserving than anyone else, but as someone with a particular call to be both symbol and substance of the life to which each one of us, in fact, is called. You might think of the priest as being a kind of mirror through which we see ourselves in a life devoted to God, and also as a window through which we imagine God sees us as set apart and beloved. And so, even as we give thanks today, and properly so, for the one being ordained a priest, we remember that what is really being celebrated is a much larger story about our life with God – a life where all persons preside and all persons proclaim eucharistia, or thanksgiving, in their daily lives – in awe of God's glory and thankful for God's all-encompassing love, across all time and ages.”

Aha! So it's not just me who should be asking important questions, but all of us. No wonder I can't answer them all by myself! No wonder I don't know where all the light switches are! It takes all of us to be here and continue asking these questions. What are we being called by God to do today? How do we express our love for each other? Who is our neighbor? How do we live out my baptismal promises? How can I be a model for others? Should I be confirmed? Should I be on the vestry? Should I start a prayer group? Is our vineyard being truly fruitful? Have we shared that fruit with others? It's not really just *our* fruit, is it? Have we built a wall around our vineyard? Is it to keep the sinners out, or to protect us and our fruits as we huddle behind it? Can we be more hospitable? Can we be more loving? Can God rely on us? What has God ordained within us? We ask such questions to each other, to ourselves, and to God. And, remember, there are no stupid questions, only questions which hang there between us and God, looking to be refined into more helpful and faithful questions to guide our way, to shine a light on Jesus' big footprints.

No, it's not just about me. I have my own personal negotiations going on with God, and I hope each of you do, too. But it warms my heart that you choose to bring all your personal stuff here to the table...this altar table of ours...to share, all the questions you love to ask and all the insights with which the Spirit has blessed you. I hope you are as curious as I am to hear each other's stories, to hear about the dreams, the worries, the opinions, and the angst. One way or another, we are all in this together, and our time together is finite. Jesus lays hands on us and then pushes us out of the comfortable nest. But though we each have our own wings and our own really tentative flight path, we fledglings have the opportunity to flock together in the same tree, perfecting and singing Christ's birdsong, excitedly and insistently squawking about what we've seen and done. Squawking about what we've discovered and discerned. Singing in tones we hope each other can understand. It's music to my ears. God bless us each and every one. Amen.