

Proper 13, Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, Year B – August 4, 2024

“Called to a Deeper Faith”

The Rev. Anne Hartley

ALL SAINTS EPISCOPAL CHURCH

SOUTH BURLINGTON, VERMONT

Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15 | Psalm 78:23-29 | Ephesians 4:1-16 | John 6:24-35

It is such a joy and privilege to be with you today. Let me start by sharing some of my story. I very rarely preach about myself, but it seems as though this is a good time to share some of my faith journey by way of introduction.

I felt called to serve God in the church since I was baptized at the age of seven, but I had no idea what that meant. Did it mean I should become a nun, like my kindergarten teacher Sister Patience at St. Anne’s convent in Denver? My Grandmother had taken me to see my first movie, The Sound of Music, that year. I loved the Mother Abbess who inspired me to “climb every mountain,” but, that wasn’t quite right. I was called to life in the church, not to a convent or school.

All through elementary, middle, and the first years of high school, when someone asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, I didn’t think to say “an Episcopal priest,” because there weren’t any ordained women priests. I would say that I wanted to be an architect or an astronaut.

After I graduated from college, I traveled to Sewanee to meet with an Episcopal priest who suggested I might become an Episcopal missionary in Africa. That didn’t feel like the right fit either. In my 20s, I could have been one of the first women called to the priesthood. Other pioneers heard that call, but not me. I wasn’t ready.

Instead, I decided to study climate change impacts on ecosystems and then later teach about the natural world. I went to forestry school for a masters degree and then got a doctorate in ecosystem ecology. For twenty years, the work God gave me to do was to move people to care about the environment and to conserve resources. One of the best experiences of my life happened during this time—the birth of my daughter—and everything during these years felt like preparation for something that was yet to come.

Life was like a long Lenten season, in which I let go of my ego-driven, self-serving career ambitions, which filled up my time, but were not fulfilling, and embraced a life of service. When I finally decided to enter the discernment process through my church in my fifties, the doors began to fly open. The discernment committee in my Florida parish confirmed that I was ready to step onto the ordination path. While my daughter Madeleine finished high school, I studied online at a Wisconsin seminary to get the foundational courses in preparation for the masters of divinity program.

When Madeleine applied to colleges, I applied to seminaries. We both got accepted and received enough financial aid and help from family, that I was able to take a leave of absence from my university job and start seminary in New York City. Even with COVID, these three years felt like Advent, a season of anticipation. Every day at seminary felt like Christmas eve, like something extraordinary was going to happen very soon, something life-transforming, enriching, and joyful.

After three years of training to be a priest back in Florida, here we are. I know you have been waiting a long time for stable leadership. I also feel like I have waited a long time to have my own church, and what an interesting call this is. Two such different churches, and both enriched with gifted lay leaders. Waiting is part of life, especially the Christian life. C.S. Lewis reminds us that God has been waiting an even longer time for the world to turn toward God.

When people would ask me to describe the kind of future parish I hoped to have, I would answer, whatever church God leads me to. I should confess, though, that I often questioned God along the way. Did I really want to live in New York City during the pandemic? Was I meant to serve two churches? Like the crowd in today's Gospel who looked for Jesus after he fed thousands, Jesus knew what they were after—they wanted more food. He was offering something better—food that endures for eternal life, the true bread from heaven. Jesus was leading me not along a career path with upward mobility, but into places where my faith would be deepened. This journey has made me downwardly mobile. It challenges me everyday to reject the world and choose God, because the only way to do

God's work in challenging circumstances is to surrender and let God work through us. That's how I intend to serve and lead the constellation.

At the end of today's Gospel, the people understood that Jesus was more than a source of food. I have learned, too, that discerning a call to ordained life is more than finding a new job to pay the bills. It is an invitation to grow more deeply into the faith, to enter into a new life of discipleship, and continue Jesus' ministry.

I'm hearing a lot about religious life in Vermont, that this is one of the most unchurched states in the nation. I am sensing that some churches function like synagogues, where people come together to support each other in a variety of ways. Worship is at the heart of our faith, of course. Through worship, we give credit and thanks to God—the source of all goodness—for the blessings of our lives. In church, the spiritual food we receive at communion fuels us to do the work God has given us to do.

Today's reading from Paul's letter to the Ephesians reflects the way churches work, by inviting people to bring their gifts and share them in their faith community. This happens in the secular community as well, but here we have a chance to see if we can create in our towns a place that models how we would love the world to be. We come to church to be fed, and for our faith to be deepened as we grow in patience and love.

Another way I intend to serve and lead is, as Paul writes, by identifying the gifts that God has given each of you to build up the church. I see many of your gifts already in music, gardening, cooking, organizing, communicating, listening, and offering to be present with those who suffer. I've heard some couples as they get older say that together they form one working body. That is also very true for the church. Together, we form the body of Christ. Paul urges his congregation in Ephesus "to live in a manner worthy of the call you have received, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another through love, striving to preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace: one body and one Spirit, as you were also called to the one hope of your call; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all..."

At its best, the church is a unified community of people who believe in the way of love and peace. This is my vision and prayer for All Saints' and St. Paul's. This is the work God has given us to do. There are more than two stars in this constellation. Each one of you is a star, reflecting the light of God's love. May God bless our parishes, and may we be beacons of hope in our community and in the world.