

Proper 7B
First Sunday at St. Peter's Church
June 20 & 21, 2009
The Rev. Emily B. Richards

A New Journey Begins

It was September when Daniel said to me, "I found a parish on the Church Deployment Office website that looks interesting. I think you should take a look at their profile. It's called St. Peter's Church and is located somewhere outside of Philadelphia." Now neither of us had ever heard of Glenside and we had only visited the Philly area together once. I, however, heeded Daniel's suggestion. I have learned to pay careful attention to my husband about such matters. You see four years ago when I was looking for a new call it was Daniel who found St. Stephen's and encouraged me to send in my materials to their rector and search committee. Several months later we were in Ridgefield, Connecticut and I was their new Assistant Rector. At that point in my ordained ministry I had decided to leave my rural, mission parish in Eastern Kentucky to venture north because I knew I needed to broaden my experience so that someday I could set out on my own as a rector. I cherish those three year and a half years among the people of St. Stephen's Church. They prepared me well for my ministry among you.

After much prayer and reflection I decided last summer it was time to take the plunge. I was ready to be in the discernment process and to seek a new call as rector of a parish. The discernment process is at times quite similar to the experience of the disciples on that stormy,

sea-tossed boat. I'm sure members of our discernment committee can attest to this. You find yourself in uncharted waters, not sure where you are going, what you should do next or when you will arrive at your long awaited destination. You know Jesus is there with you. But sometimes it seems as if he's in the back of the boat sound asleep. You are compelled to live in the present moment, trusting in the Holy Spirit's guidance each step of the way. It is both a terrifying and yet thrilling journey of discovery that leads you deeper into faithfulness.

There was one day during my process when I was particularly weary and discouraged, and I asked my former rector, Mark, the very same question our committee asked their consultant, "How will I know? How will I know it's the right parish, the right call? I have taken the plunge. Now, how will I find my way through these waters?" "Emily," he responded, "If you are willing to open your heart to these parishes and their people, willing to share your story and listen to their stories, you will know and they will know. Trust in the process. Trust that God is with you and with them and through the Holy Spirit you will be led to one another. It will happen."

It did happen. All throughout my journey and yours we were being drawn to one another. Your joyful spirit and intentional hospitality as a people radiated through the many phone and e-mail conversations with Bob Hartung, through contact with my Shepherd, Carmen Gelinas, and in that initial phone interview with the entire committee. I got off the phone and thought to myself, "Wow, this was actually fun!" The connection to one another grew even stronger when Bob Hartung, Carmen Gelinas, Betty Hillary and Laurel Mosteller came

to visit me and my family in Ridgefield. After the dinner in our home with the four of them, Daniel and I both remarked that we felt we had shared an evening with long-time friends.

And then when Daniel and I were driving home from our visit here in March with both the discernment committee and the vestry, he asked me, "So, what do you think?" I got very quiet and tears came streaming down my face. You will come to learn that I'm not often described as a quiet person. However, I do tend to respond to the work of the Holy Spirit in my life through awe-filled moments of silence and tears. I knew something special had taken place in that visit, especially as we broke bread together in the Eucharist. The next morning, as I was getting ready for the 8am service, my rector popped his head into my office to see how it all went. Again with tears in my eyes I said to him, "This parish has touched my heart in a profound way. No matter what happens, I am a changed person by being on this journey with them."

In his sermon on April 19th Bob said that a miracle had occurred, a miracle of our converging journeys and mutual discernment. As time passes and our relationship grows as priest and people we will come to a fuller understanding of this miracle. I believe that God was sowing the seeds for our journey together long before we could have ever known this was where God was leading us. It wasn't until last week that I noticed for the first time two plaques hanging above the ramp which connects the parish auditorium to the chapel and nave of the church. They proudly proclaim that in 1999 St. Peter's Church was designated as an Accessible Congregation by the National Organization on Disability. In that same year I left my lay ministry at Church of the Good Shepherd in Athens, Ohio where Fr. Mike Morgan

was rector at the time and headed to Sewanee with Daniel to begin my seminary studies. Friends, ten years ago God was beginning to prepare you for me and me for you.

Today, our two separate journeys become one. The work God began ten years ago culminates in this day. And even though we are relieved that the long discernment process which led us to one another is finally over, a renewed sense of mission and ministry as God's chosen people, the people of St. Peter's Church, is just beginning. We are now in the boat together. In it we will encounter both smooth sailing as well as rough and stormy seas. Together, we will rejoice and laugh and celebrate. Together, we will get lost and confused, discouraged and afraid. Together, we will cry out to God to save us. I urge us to hold on to the belief that we do not travel this new journey alone. For, just as Jesus was in the boat with his first disciples, he is now in the boat with us.

Well-known author Frederick Buechner writes, "Go....Go for God's sake, and for your own sake, too, and for the world's sake. Climb into your little tub of a boat and keep going....Christ sleeps in the deepest selves of all of us, and... we can call on him as the fishermen did in their boat to come awake within us and to give us courage, to give us hope, to show us our way." I have no doubt that we will continue to be led into uncharted waters, called to do God's holy work in ways we could not have imagined possible. I also have no doubt that Jesus will be there to reassure us. "Do not be afraid," he will tell us. "Trust each other. Trust me. Trust in the journey. I have shown you the way before. I will show you the way which lies ahead."

May we rejoice this day in the miraculous work already begun on our behalf by our gracious and loving God. And with joyful confidence may we step out together in faith as the people of St. Peter's. May we trust that Jesus will be with us on this journey, giving us the courage and hope we will need to sustain us in the years to come, and guiding and strengthening us through the gift of the Holy Spirit as he has done so all along the way. Amen.