

Easter 4, Yr. C
April 29, 2007
St. Paul's, Fairfield

“Because I knew you, I’ve been changed for good”

Today is a day of beginnings and endings, on many levels. Miranda is beginning her life as a Christian at St. Paul's as I am ending mine. So... since I won't get to be part of Miranda's growth in this parish, I think there are some things she ought to know about St. Paul's .

First, she should know that this is a parish where worship is centered in the Eucharist. Nothing demonstrates this more clearly than the story I love to tell on Ben about the 9:15 service a few years back. The fire alarm went off, and instead of evacuating the church as we should have, Ben told everyone to get communion first, then leave. Now that's Eucharistic centered worship!

Miranda should also know that people will go to creative extremes to make an announcement noticeable: remember when Mary McClain dressed up as a flower to promote the choir bulb sale? Or when Alyson Baker and some of the YPF dressed in Prom Gowns to advertise the Prom dress expo? Or one of my favorites: when Rich Hagedus dressed in black tights and a giant red lobster suit to publicize the lobster fest?

And it would also be helpful for Miranda to know that we have certain traditions here that are very important: for example, the white lights on the Christmas trees go on during the 3rd verse of Silent Night, **NOT** the 1st (which I made the mistake of doing my first year and I'm still hearing about it). We also have the tradition of wearing red at Pentecost. Even Ben does this, when he remembers to wear his red socks! I'm counting on you all to make sure he wears them this year!

There's also somewhat of a tradition that on Pentecost I do something different with my sermon. You may remember the year I did a magic trick that involved fire, and when I looked over and saw Charlie Rhudy's face, I could tell he thought I was going to burn the church down!

And Miranda, let me warn you that the rector is fond of using nicknames, so beware of what he might call you. Once during a service after I'd used bubbles to make a point in my sermon, he called me “Rev. Bubbles”. You can imagine how I felt about that! He only did that once! Another time, he called me by my initials “MAO” in the service, and I think the congregation

wondered if we'd gone communist or something. But don't worry, whatever nickname he comes up for you comes out of love.

A lot has changed during my years here at St. Paul's, and I'm not just talking about the fact that Ben has less hair and I have more. When I first came, women could be priests here, but not ushers. Now we have three women ushers! Other things have changed as well: the ladies bathroom is no longer the lounge it used to be with the sofa and chairs. We have a beach service in the summers. We have voice mail and a sound system (that works most of the time) and an awesome website.

The list goes on and on of many, many changes, some bringing joy, others sorrow.

Last year, Alice loaned me the book, "Wicked". It's a retelling of the stories of the witches in the Land of Oz. There's also a Broadway musical that's based on the novel, and I want to share one of the songs with you this morning. It says better than I could ever hope to what it's meant to me to be at St. Paul's.

People come into our lives for a reason, bringing something we must learn, and we are led to those who help us most to grow, if we let them, and we help them in return. I know I'm who I am today because I knew you. Because I knew you, I've been changed for good.

In just a minute, we will all participate in Miranda's baptism. The very first thing we do at that time in the service is one of the most important parts of baptism to me. It's when the celebrant says, "The Candidate for Holy Baptism will now be presented," and the family and sponsors respond by presenting the child BY NAME.

I've been part of over 150 baptisms since I've been here, and each time when I'm instructing the families, I always say the same thing about this part of the baptism: *presenting your child by name is more than just a liturgical direction. It's a theological statement that God calls each of us BY NAME, and there is no other person with that name who is like your child who has ever lived or will ever live on this planet. Your child is known and created by God personally, uniquely, by name, forever.*

When Jesus calls us by name it means we're known and loved and accepted for who we are, not for who we hope to become. I've said this many times

from this pulpit, over and over, but through all of you, I have come to understand more than ever the depth of what this means.

When I first came to St. Paul's seven and a half years ago, it was clear to me that you had a healthy, vibrant parish with a strong rector and lay leadership. Truth be told, I really wasn't sure what I could offer.

But the miracle that I discovered is that you called me by name, *for who I am*, and the greatest gift I've received from you has been growing into who I am through your love and acceptance. Because I knew you, I've been changed for good.

You may say I have brought things to this parish that mean a lot to you, and I pray God that is so. But whatever I have brought is because you called it out of me. You encouraged me to bring my own gifts and uniqueness. You let me grow into who God calls me to be as a priest and person, and I will never, ever be the same.

You have been Christ to me by encouraging all the particularities of who I am, and that is what true Christian community is. I came as your priest, and you have been my ministers. Because I knew you, I've been changed for good.

And you did it by being yourselves. You didn't come up with an elaborate 5 year plan; you didn't set measurable goals and objectives. You didn't will it to happen.

You offered yourselves, in the uniqueness of who you are called to be. You let me share the joys of your lives: births, weddings, graduations, developmental milestones, career successes. And you let me share the sorrows as well: the deaths, the losses, the betrayals. I am more honored and deeply blessed by your trust than I can ever say.

I want to end with final verse of the song from "Wicked":

It may well be that we will never meet again in this lifetime, so let me say before we part: so much of me is made of what I learned from you. You'll be with me like a handprint on my heart, and now whatever way our stories may end, I know you have rewritten mine. Because I knew you, I have been changed for good."

Thank you for you. I love you all. AMEN