

Pentecost XX

Build houses and live in them... multiply there, and do not decrease. Jeremiah 29:3

'Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.' Luke 17:19

In a few moments we will welcome Anna Joy Derby Mankhe into the Body of Christ through the sacrament of baptism. As always, baptisms are especially joyful and meaningful occasions for us here at St John's. And as we see whenever we look around us, these occasions of celebration are *multiplying and not decreasing*.

Out of curiosity, I checked back in the parish register where I record baptisms, confirmations, marriages and funerals. In the first three years I served here – 1992- 1995, I performed 5 baptisms. In the last three years, we've had 20! As I am so fond of saying, *Alleluia!*

I've had some conversations recently that have made me particularly mindful of what's at stake for us –all of us- at these times of welcome and incorporation of our newest, and often youngest, members. One of these was with my niece, who got married last weekend. About a month ago she wrote this in an email to me.

I'm not ready to call myself a Christian yet, nor can I really say on any particular day whether I believe in God. (I can say that I wish I'd grown up with more exposure to church, because without any sense of vocabulary or rites I feel like a clumsy outsider, not knowing when to stand up or sit down or what to say during a service, and that's made it even more intimidating to start to explore religion.)

She went on to say that she was stuck and confounded in her ability to plan a marriage service (or to invite someone to officiate) because of this dilemma. I don't know how to reconcile the two things we're looking for, and it's what's kept us from making firm plans about our ceremony. We want solemnity and a sense of ritual, because this is an important promise, that we're not taking lightly. And we believe in tradition, for ourselves and our guests -- to connect the commitment we're making to the commitments our friends and family have made before us. But, we don't want to pretend a faith we don't feel in order to convey a sense of ceremony.

When we talked on the phone, my niece elaborated on her sense of confusion, and I would almost say, of failure. She said, "I thought I had to finish my spiritual journey before I got married." I replied, "None of us ever finish our spiritual journeys! They are

lifelong. So forget that goal!” She laughed, but I thought, how lonely, and how painful, to believe such a thing.

So, one of the meanings of the baptismal event is that we are welcoming Anna Joy into her spiritual journey, a journey that will last a lifetime and in which we are all participants. Joining a Christian community means that we do not undertake our spiritual journeys in isolation or through intellectual activity alone. As Steve said so acutely last week, “Christianity is not a view of life, it is a way of life.” We are here today to pledge to accompany Anna Joy on her spiritual journey, both practically, in this particular time and place, and symbolically, as fellow members of the Body of Christ.

I also recently had a conversation with my friend Carolyn about her two children, who have had no religious upbringing, (They are now 34 and 27) Carolyn used to be after me to baptize these kids, and when I asked why she would say that she wanted them to know bible stories and be versed in Christian cultural history. I would retort that those things did not come automatically with a few splashes of water; these were educational and not sacramental goals. And I would say that the meaning of baptism is entrance into a Christian community, and that I would not baptize her children unless they were all attending church.

So when we rehearsed this issue a couple of weeks ago, Carolyn repeated her wish that her kids were more religiously literate. But then she said, “and they’ve had no experience of participating in a community of faith, where they could absorb the values of a common life. “*Aha*, I thought, *we are making progress here*. The children are still unchurched, (as we say, and as I’m sure they do not think of themselves) but at least my dear friend has come to a more complete understanding and appreciation of what my work and life are all about.

Thirdly, a conversation with another friend, who told me that her husband – who is now 81- was in a very good mood and had a lot of energy these days. When I asked why, she paused for a bit and then said he had been on a quest for some time, and the outcome was that he had decided he didn’t believe in God. She said that he’d been reading a series of contemporary anti-religion books: Sam Harris, **The End of Faith**, Christopher Hitchens, **God is Not Great**, Richard Dawkins, **The God Delusion**. “Have you read any of those books?” she asked. “NO,” I said, “and I don’t intend to. “

She asked if any of my parishioners had read them. I said I didn’t know. Then I said, “Many, if not most, of my parishioners have been hurt or rejected or abused by the

church in some way, and yet they have discovered that they still believe in God and need to belong to a community of faith and practice. “

At this point it seemed to occur to my friend that perhaps she was taking one undiplomatic tack after another in our conversation. But she went on to say that her husband was telling his children, one by one, about his loss of faith and “letting them off the hook” (after, may I say, berating one of his sons for years about not giving his children a *Jewish* enough upbringing.) I said, “Well, I hope he doesn’t feel he has to have that discussion with *me*. “ But he probably will; he probably will not be able to resist.

I am reminded again of Steve’s formulation: *Christianity is not a view of life, it is a way of life*. I’m not a scholar of Judaism but I imagine the same could be said of that branch of faith – perhaps even more so. And as I said earlier, in our way of life *we do not undertake our spiritual journeys in isolation or through intellectual activity alone*. Some of us here may have begun that way, but the meaning of baptism is otherwise, the meaning is that we are joining Anna Joy, not setting her adrift to find her own way.

It seems striking and sad to me to hear of someone’s exhilaration at his loss of faith. But what remains with me most poignantly from this interchange with my friend is even more striking. That’s my awareness of and gratitude for the tribute paid by all of you who make up this community of faith here at St. John’s : a tribute to God, really, to God’s ability through love and mercy to overcome alienation, disillusionment, and the pain we humans inflict on one another; a tribute to God’s gracious invitation to all of you – to all of us– to enter or reenter a place of worship and a place of spiritual companionship. And also striking is the tribute to the spiritual courage and faith and hope that has brought you all – has brought us all- through these doors and into this holy fellowship.

And so, into this holy fellowship let us welcome Anna Joy, with a promise to accompany her on her journey, here, now, and always.

Alleluia! Amen.