

## EPIPHANY IV

*Jesus and his disciples went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught.* Mark 1:21

Some of you have watched with me a video I have of the British actor Alec McGowan performing a one-man recitation of the entire Gospel of Mark. It's an astonishing feat of memory, interpretation, and, I would say, faith. One of the striking things about Mark's account of Jesus' ministry, heard at one sitting as early Christians might well have heard it, is the compression, the leanness, of the narrative, and the constant motion. It's as if Jesus is always on fast-forward, needed to get his work on earth accomplished.

A common theological parlor game is to speculate what might have happened if Jesus had had more than three years to enact his mission and ministry. What more, and what different, might he have attained? What would extra years of experience and wisdom added to his ministry? Would the realm of God truly have arrived?

Or would Jesus have burned out? Would he have become discouraged by the constant opposition of the religious authorities, the misunderstandings and betrayals among his inner circle, the profound power of evil in the world? What if Jesus had given up?

I serve on a diocesan committee called Compensation and Benefits. In the last year we have spent a great deal of time considering health care plans, and as part of that we've discussed what we call "clergy wellness" or lack thereof) Recently, the chair of the committee sent me an article titled *Throwing in the Collar* from a journal called **The Living Church**, which said, in part.

While there are a few young folks trying out th(e) priestly life, by and large it is not happening on the scale needed. And so, at least in my part of the world (the Northeast), the Episcopal Church continues to shrink. The future does not look very bright from these shores. Why is this? What is happening to thwart our good intentions? ...

As a young man who went into seminary right out of college, following a sincere and earnest call to pastoral leadership, my growing family has followed me into parish after parish, seeking that elusive "great situation" where we could feel fruitful. And what have I experienced in my 10 years since beginning this journey? After seminary, the Church sends people out into parish ministry to do a job for which they have received very little practical

training (i.e., conflict resolution, administration, politics, etc.). Once in their jobs, there are few resources readily available to help these clergy to gain the skills needed to do these jobs well. And yet, all the while, our parishioners are evaluating and critiquing our performance (either privately or publicly) on the basis of these tasks for which we have little background. Unfortunately, there is very little support at the diocesan level if the parish priest runs into difficulty. We are for the most part on our own.

Even though we work on behalf of our bishops, we receive no real constructive feedback on our leadership from them. But we have hundreds of people in the pews who compare us constantly to the BFR (“Beloved Former Rector”), who subconsciously project their own fears and anxieties upon us, and who try to shape us to meet their expectations of what a good and faithful priest is supposed to be. (They are more than ready to tell us how to do our jobs!) For all of this, we get paid what amounts to a stipend, far below what we know our value would be in the business world. And all the while, we are expected to be the joyful, loving, smiling leader of a Christian community, doling out the warm fuzzies, thankful that we have the blessed opportunity to follow our deepest calling....

That is why it is over for me. I am putting my collar in the drawer and heading out into the business world. For 10 years my growing family has followed me as I pursued my calling and dream to be a parish priest. There have been good moments. But, by and large, what we have gained is growing debt, criticism, judgment, instability, impossible expectations, and heartbreak. I know that others have had more positive experiences, and I am glad for them. But for me, this ride is over.

(posted 9.05)

I don't know the author of this piece, but I know the parish he resigned from: it's one of the wealthiest in this diocese, a plum. This rector did not stay long enough in his position for me even to meet him – he and the parish must have had a brutal, rapid falling out.

When I read this article I cried. Literally. They were tears of very mixed emotions: pain and sorrow at a story I recognized all too clearly as at one point, and up to a point, having been my story; joy and gratitude that ultimately my ministry has taken a different turn.

I said at the Annual Meeting last week how blessed I feel to be here at St John's. Most of you have heard me say repeatedly that in 2007 we accomplished two major pieces of work: we secured marriage equality in the Commonwealth – and I mean we, because St John's so whole-heartedly

supported me and the Religious Coalition for the Freedom to Marry in this effort; and we finished our basement renovation.

With the completion of those projects, I thought for a while that my work at St John's might be drawing to a close. Perhaps it was time for me to move on. But as I thought and talked and prayed about all this, God gave me a different answer.

The answer was, *why leave now? Now you're having fun! Now you're happy!*

Does this sound frivolous? Well, a couple of stories about the early days of my ministry. Just before my ordination, when I was talking to the bishop about my plans, he asked what I would do if I got the job I was hoping for. "Well," I said, "I plan to go in there knowing how to use the salad fork, and quietly radicalize the place."

The bishop laughed. "Not a bad plan," he said, "and I think if you took this job you could have some personal fun. And I don't say that to many women deacons."

Several weeks later, I was ordained, and I had gotten the job and started working as an assistant rector. At a potluck dinner for a diocesan committee I served on, a woman asked me if I felt different now that I was ordained. I said, instantly, "yes, I feel different. I feel happy."

I thought then that *that* answer was frivolous, that it was not very theological. But in the years since, I have decided that it was a deeply theological answer. I was happy, and I was indeed having personal fun as the bishop had predicted. And that experience, and warm memories of those three years, have served me well in times and years, and there have been many, when my work was no fun at all and I was not happy, not even close.

Whenever I'm advising someone newly ordained, or about to be, about job prospects, I counsel them to take a position where they think they could have some fun. And be happy. It's spiritual money in the bank.

I never considered throwing in my collar. I never thought, not for one moment, that I was not called to be a priest and rector. But I did pray sometimes that God would, you know, lighten up!

My sister, who spent many years in a Christian cult, had a poster on her bedroom door that proclaimed, "Joy is the infallible sign of the presence of God." This poster irritated me, as did my sister, with her relentless cheerfulness and biblical literalism. But I've come to believe in the poster's sentiment: *Joy is the infallible sign of the presence of God*. In my life, at least, that's the truth, and my job is to recognize it; to recognize the joy, and to give thanks and praise to the God who is that joy.

I've decided that my feelings about fun and happiness are not only not frivolous, they're not really selfish, either. If we as priests and rectors are happy, the communities where we preside are bound to pick up on that, and to reflect that joy and happiness. And of course, it works both ways. It's far more fun, and more fruitful, to preside over a community where joy abounds, and where fun is understood to be part of God's hope for us, than to try to lead a group of depressed and reluctant folks. Moses found that out, surely, during those 40 years wandering in the wilderness with whining Israelites.

I have a dear friend and mentor who said to me once, years ago when I did not know him well, "I recommend long tenures, if they are good ones. It takes years to get to know a community, to establish the kind of deep relationships that our ministry calls us to." He was warning me of the very traps alluded to in the sad article I read earlier – the illusion of moving rapidly from place to place, looking for instant gratification and profound pastoral connections, all at once.

Put that way, it sounds paradoxical and absurd. Relationships don't happen overnight. Nor does effective, enduring leadership. These things take years to develop and nurture – unless, maybe, you are Jesus. And most of us are not Jesus, and if we're wise, we don't aspire to be.

I spent some time this week, after the annual meeting, reflecting on the astonishing lay leadership we are blessed with now here at St. John's. One of the great joys of a long tenure is to watch people enter a parish, feel their way from a first tentative step through the door, watch them and accompany them as they heal and grow, as they come to participate more and more fully in the life of the parish, and as they take on leadership.

That *they* is *you*, my dear friends. My life and ministry here at St John's are blessed by you, your faithfulness, your humor and sense of fun, your creativity, intelligence, and hard work. Your joy.

And together, I believe, *our joy is the infallible sign of the presence of God*. Alleluia! Alleluia! Amen.