

Margot Wilcox 7/22/2012

When Michael asked me to do the meditation for today, he suggested that I share memories of our nearly 40 years as St. David's parishioners, especially in light of how those who welcomed us here back then passed on their dreams for this parish, and to share our own hopes and prayers for the future.

Preparing for today has been interesting. First of all, because I'm still trying to figure out just how Michael got me to agree to do this! Speaking in public about anything more personal than the church budget isn't something I easily imagine doing. Also, it's been amazing how thinking about the past has brought back stories and memories I'd all but forgotten. So..., it's been fun to revisit those past times and to sort through them for memories appropriate to Michael's guidelines.

Tom and I hadn't been churchgoers during the early years of our marriage. But when we moved to Tuckasegee, one of Tom's department colleagues, Carl Hill, was a neighbor. Carl, an active member of St. David's, was ever gentle but nevertheless persistent in his invitations to us to go to church with him. Eventually, we decided to try it, though our initial feelings were that the Episcopal Church would have too much ritual and be too formal for us. Wrong -- on both counts! John Rivers, who was the vicar, was anything but formal. And though the liturgy at that time was in a state of flux prior to the National Church coming out with the current Prayer Book, we quickly learned that the rituals did not get in the way of meaningful worship. And, most important of all, we felt accepted here for who we were.

A painting in the parish hall shows this building as a derelict, "romantic ruin" and a fitting subject for WCU's art students during the '40s and '50s. When we first began coming to St. David's, it was only 12-13 years after the church had been refurbished and re-consecrated after a period of 17 years of disuse. Many of the parishioners who were here when we came had been instrumental in bringing about this transformation, and both their love of this place and their ministry were strong. Among those folks, Nancy Tuttrup and Ruth Nelson, who were co-chairs of the Altar Guild, shine bright in my memory. They drew me into that aspect of church life, conveying the sense of deep hospitality that the church offers to all who come through the door. Their ideas of service to the church were clear in everything they did. They had worked with WCU students in the early years, preparing Sunday evening suppers for them and entertaining them in their homes. Nancy was the one who created the beautiful scrapbooks and memory boxes that are kept in the Parish Hall. Their devotion and faithfulness were inspirations to me. And I felt blessed when they asked me to take over as Altar Guild chair, when aging and ill health began to catch up with them.

In the late '70s John Rivers, who had become increasingly disabled by his loss of hearing, left St. David's to become the first missionary to the deaf in this diocese. He was so dear to our family that at first we wondered if we would be able to remain at St. David's without him and his family here. However, it didn't take long to realize that our feelings for St. David's went beyond love of John, who had nurtured our faith, guided us through confirmation, and baptized our children. We had become part of something much bigger and were committed to being part of St. David's future.

Nancy and Ruth and Carl and John and many others had shown us by the way they lived their lives what it means to be faithful -- to something beyond the priest that you really like or the priest's gender or a beautiful old building or a particular liturgy. All of these things and more were conflicts during the late '70s and well into the '80s that caused people to leave this parish.

But for us there were these “rocks”, these matriarchs and patriarchs, who had become our mentors, our guides, and our family.

So when the going got really rough in the mid-1980s we continued to stick with St. David’s. To replace John a search committee was formed, and the parish decided to call a young woman, Sherry Mattson, to be our new vicar. It’s difficult now to picture what a radical thing that was at the time; we were the first church in the diocese to call a woman priest. Two or three families left immediately, not prepared to be ministered to by a woman. But in my memory I can still feel my great excitement over Sherry’s coming, and I can only project that most others felt the same way; the sense of her call had been a strong one. And we had been effectively without a priest for a couple of years while we continued to support John financially as he prepared for his new ministry; we were ready for some ordained leadership. I tried as I prepared this meditation to recall the specifics of what went wrong, but those details aren’t important to this story, and they would be one-sided. The long and the short of it is this: Sherry and St. David’s were not a good fit. We no longer felt like a parish family. Wedges were being driven into long-standing relationships. The parish shrank as more and more people left. We were literally down to only six or eight folks actively engaged in the parish. I think Newt Smith was Senior Warden at the time; he and some others went to the bishop for help. The bishop recommended “family therapy” -- having a mediator to come in to listen and analyze the problems and suggest solutions.

Ultimately, Sherry left, and we were again “on our own”. We re-grouped, folks slowly began to return, and visiting priests would come to lead the services. Folks often ask now why we (and the six or so others) stayed. My flip answer has been “we were too ornery to be driven off”. But in truth we carried in our hearts and souls the germinating seeds of that St. David’s heritage of being faithful to our ideal. We might have to scabble to get things going again, but we knew others before us had been devoted to just such a cause in this place. If they had done it, how could we let them down, how could we not work toward the same goal of building here in Cullowhee a special community of worship in the Episcopal tradition?

After about 3 years under the healing tutelage of Heber Peacock, whom the diocese sent to us as an interim priest, we were led to call Michael. His strong and charismatic ministry has attracted many of you here. The years of Michael’s tenure have been free of the types of turmoil we experienced back in the ‘70s and ‘80s. But by his very nature Michael is always throwing challenges at us: urging us to strife of a different kind -- to become ever more inclusive, ever more radically welcoming to all who come through our doors, to step outside our comfort zones -- including getting me to give this meditation!

Another of Michael’s leadership techniques has been to encourage frequent self-examination as a parish, and so following up on our most recent self-probe, we find ourselves on the brink of a big new adventure in the re-building of the parish hall. It’s fairly daunting to think of tearing down something that has “always” (in our memory) been there, to borrow money and to build something completely different. But it seems that is where the Spirit is leading us -- to make a new center for parish activities, one that will match our radical welcome philosophy, one that will be a sign of our commitment to the future.

This new building symbolizes part of my hopes for the future of St. David’s -- that the parish family will continue to grow in its capacity to include all who wish to join us and to continue making a difference in the world.

And I also pray that when Michael is ready to retire (may it be many years in the future!), the Spirit will be speaking so strongly in this parish that everyone will know that even without Michael, St. David's community is worthy of their support and love.

May we always be open to hearing what the Spirit is saying to us as God's people.