

Farewell Sermon at St. Andrew's
The Rev. John Rohrs
August 21, 2022

Over the course of my thirteen years here, one of my secret pastimes has been to walk through the empty church, usually about once a day. It became sort of a ritual, a little moment of prayer and appreciation. I like it because it's quiet and peaceful, and because the light hits just so through the stained-glass windows. But most of all, I like it because this is a holy space. I can feel God's presence here, every time. And that's not because of this building, as beautiful as it is. It's because of you. It's the people who make this space holy. It's not just God's presence I feel; it's yours. I look at the pews and I see your faces. After all these years, I know where you sit; and more than that I know the stories of your lives, which has been my great privilege. All the weddings and funerals, baptisms and Youth Sundays, Holy Weeks and Flower Festivals – they all come to mind in those quiet moments.

But that's not all. It's not just God's presence I feel when I walk through here, and it's not just yours either. It's the presence of generations of people who have called St. Andrew's home. When I'm standing in this empty church, I can imagine parishioners gathered here during the Great Depression and two world wars – worried for their loved ones near and far. I picture this congregation, in those same years, holding its first Christmas Pageant, proclaiming a message of hope.

Or I picture a funeral here, during the early days of HIV/AIDS. Most churches wouldn't do those funerals. They were afraid of illness or afraid of embracing people who were gay. But this church welcomed those funerals. They were acts of compassion, and you didn't stop there. Church members started cooking meals and providing hospice care. In time, it turned into the first AIDS care organization in Hampton Roads.

I close my eyes again, and I imagine this church commissioning Weeks Cofer as the first woman elected to a Vestry in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Or I think of 2013, when we joined with Dennis Pendleton and Paul Ford to celebrate the first same-gender blessing in our Diocese. I think of our work around mental health care or racial healing. I think of parishioners staying up all night to care for homeless guests in White Hall. Or I think of two years ago, when we couldn't even get in the building – so we gathered out front for church

on the grounds, and for drive-by blessings. If you listen in the quiet moments, all of those stories are here, echoing off the walls.

In today's gospel, the leader of the synagogue criticizes Jesus. He had just healed a woman on the sabbath. Never mind that she had been hobbled for 18 years. Never mind that she was set free from pain and started praising God. The man criticizes Jesus because his action was beyond the standard of practice. It was out of bounds to work on the sabbath. He should have saved the healing for another day.

But Jesus knows, as you know, as the people of St. Andrew's have always known, that love can't wait. It couldn't wait in all of those historical moments, those boundary-breaking moments, that I outlined above. It is always the right time to love, above and beyond what is expected or easy or normal. In this place, in this congregation, you have always loved more.

For thirteen years, my family and I have been recipients of your love. Andie said it beautifully last week and expressed the gratitude that we feel for how you have loved us and supported us and our children through the most formative years of our lives. We will always treasure that in our hearts. It's bittersweet to think about all the memories and moments we have shared.

But I hope that my words this morning can offer a different reminder as well. For a hundred and eleven years, this congregation has been living out its mission of love, and in every one of those examples – and many more I could name – there were lay people at the center of that work. The call to love is part of the DNA of this church, not because of your clergy, but because of you. You know well that you are baptized ministers of the gospel. It's your baptism that defines you as agents of love, seven days a week, three hundred and sixty-five days a year.

So it seems fitting that we have a baptism today. In a moment we will baptize Jack Oeschlager, the newest member of this beloved church. He doesn't realize what a gift he is giving us. He is reminding us of our deepest calling – to love beyond the norm. I have every confidence that you will continue to do that in this place: that you will welcome the stranger, feed the hungry, care for the sick, and on and on. It is who you are, and I'm so deeply grateful to have shared in that ministry with you. I love you all, and I thank God for you always. Amen.