

St. John's Parish, Clayton
Sunday, April 27, 2008

Pastor Jim Stickney

Always be ready to make your defense when anyone challenges you to justify the hope that is in you. [I Peter 3: 15]

About a month ago I was on my way for an interim interview in San Francisco. I parked my car on the street near a BART station, when an old clunker car stopped. A woman got out and began telling me a hard luck story, thinking I lived there. When she asked for money for gas and food for her mother in San Leandro, I decided to help her out a little, She promised she'd come back to my home and repay me. So I told her that I was not local, just taking BART for a job interview. Immediately she told me I would get that job, in Jesus' holy Name. Amen.

Well, that buoyed me up quite a bit before I entered the interview room, and I thought that perhaps Divine Providence had placed her there just to reassure me. At the same time I thought that it was just coincidence, that she was just making nice. A week later I got a call from the Senior Warden that they chose someone else.

Here's what I'm wrestling with today: how can we justify the hope that is in us? Instead of walking to BART, what if I had stopped and asked that woman, "You've just given me reassurance, and I thank you. But how can you be so sure? You spoke of God's holy name. But God didn't tell you I'd get this job. Realistically, she would not be ready to make a defense when challenged to justify the hope that was in her. And realistically, I already knew that.

Less than two days later I got a call from the new Diocese of San Joaquin, asking me if I'd like to be considered to serve as interim at a church near Fresno, in Hanford, about fifteen miles from my sister's house where I would stay. So next Sunday I'll be down there for an interview. And I'm very hopeful; not because of a chance encounter with a person too eager to rush in with a promise, but because I feel the same kind of pulling that I felt when I interviewed here: I want to be of service to the people in a place (or a Diocese) undergoing conflict. That would be how I justify the hope that is in me about this prospect.

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Last Sunday our Bishop told us of Trinity Church in Menlo Park, where the Rector had served for less than a year before dying of a fatal brain tumor. Of course his own family members are in shock, but that church is grieving too. And within two days our own deployment office, Michael Barlowe, asked me if I would consider interviewing to serve as the interim while they call another priest. I said I would, again because I feel called to serve

where the needs are great. I want to be part of a Resurrection story, to see how God will be at work in tension. That's how I can justify the hope that is in me, not as a kind of magical thinking, but as a solid trust in Divine Providence. I do my work and I pray, and I walk in faith.

This is my last day here. All my things are out of the office (except for a box of Girl Scout cookies and a cup for Peet's coffee) and it's even been spruced & repainted. When I came here I was hopeful that God would work to renew this church. Here's a short history of justifying the hope that was in you and me and the diocese.

There's a rule of thumb in the Interim Ministry training: for every year that the previous pastor did ministry, you can count on about a month of interim ministry. John Bennison left this church in June of 2006, after serving here for 24 years. Next week, in May, you will welcome your new Rector, after an interim of 23 months.

In my interview with the Vestry in July of 2006 I met people of great good will who were in varying degrees of shock at the media storm and ecclesiastical turmoil that had just swept through their cherished church family. Some members had already departed, more were about to leave, the finances were unsettled, and I saw some tempted to despair that this church was on a fatal downward spiral. At that interview meeting I reminded the Vestry of the image of the Body of Christ, which like our physical bodies desires to be healthy and overcome pathologies. I pointed out that the ministrations of doctors and nurses does not cure a sick person. Instead, sound medical practice aligns itself with natural forces of healing that are always at work in the body. Even now, red blood cells in our blood are at work destroying harmful bacteria and disposing of toxins in our bodies.

But unlike our physical bodies, which will eventually wear out and cease functioning, the Body of Christ continually renews itself with new and renewed members. I encouraged the Vestry to celebrate the outreach this church already did, in part because new members of a church want to know that this body of people does not exist just to worship and enjoy fellowship, but also to put into practice the challenge of Christ Jesus to reach out and to minister to those most on the margins.

Shortly after I arrived, I was contacted by Chris McManus, whom I had known for many years, and who had already recruited Joni to serve on the board of her ministry to work with traditional birth attendants in Africa teaching midwifery. It's important to say that I did not recruit her. Instead, she called me. I believe that it was God's Holy Spirit that put a thought in her mind to join us here at St. John's.

My previous work on the rather thankless Diocesan assessment appeals committee had not been in vain — that in fact I could reassure our parish delegation that we had nothing to fear from presenting our case for significant assessment relief. As many of you know, they gave us much more than we thought to ask!

By the new year of 2007 we had a child care person on a more or less steady basis, and we worked on plans for renewed Sunday school starting in the fall of 2007. Perhaps in the past this church had paid someone to teach Sunday School classes, but we resolved to recruit adults in our church to step up and teach seasonally. I thought this might be difficult, but once I got the word out, several stepped forward, and now we enjoy this renewed ministry nearly every Sunday except summer. I regret I was not able to bring together a youth group or a Confirmation class, but I promised to highlight that need for your new Rector, and I have done so. And after a gap of a few months, we again have a new person for childcare.

A former colleague used to tell of his practice of the ministry of benign neglect. By that he meant his reluctance to work on projects that were better done by others. It did not take our Vestry and parish members too long to scope out that I was not very concerned with building issues or the physical plant, other than to be grateful for all the generous work I saw burgeoning around here and to try to give explicit thanks when I saw such hard work bear beautiful fruit. As a former Rector, I had become all too familiar with sump pumps and attic leaks. When I told you that I wanted to focus on pastoral and worship concerns, many of you stepped up. When I first got here, I thought your church looked fine. As I leave today, I can tell you it looks great! What a lot you got done in this interim time! Congratulations!

One other area in which I know I have justified the hope that is in me has to do with those times when people on the Search Committee and Vestry would ask me: Jim, do you really think there are good priests out there who would really want to come and serve at this church after all we've been through? Aren't we bad news? Every time I heard a comment like that, I became quite emphatic in two ways.

First, I have never seen this church as some kind of ecclesiastical sick puppy! And I wouldn't let anyone else see it that way either, not while I was around! And I wouldn't let any sense of despair survive in the atmosphere of my perception that this was a marvelous church and a great group of faithful Christians that had survived an unprecedented crisis and was now ready to embrace its future.

And second, I know many, many younger priests who continually impress me by their energy and insights and ideas. Frankly, I work hard to keep up with them, and I don't always succeed. I reminded you that there was a very good pool of fine candidates — and you have chosen the right person for your future!

A few months after I was ordained, I enrolled in Clinical Pastoral Education, an intense supervised training that in my case took place in a cancer ward. This work of visiting cancer patients every day was very challenging to me, but the group work of reflection on how to improve our ministry was even tougher. But at the end of the program we were surprised by our feelings at goodbyes: both to one another and the patients on the ward. The leaders of

our group called it "Training in Termination." There were a few tears; a few promises to stay in touch which we knew would probably not happen, and a party. Then we were done.

I'll end with the story of my last communion call, to a woman of 91 who's housebound and whom I visit monthly. I brought my Communion kit and rang the bell. We sat down and visited for a while, and then it was time to pray the Lord's Prayer and share Communion. When I took out the cruet for consecrated wine, I noticed it was empty. She could see that too, and I apologized that I had not refilled it. When I opened the pyx, which contained the blessed wafers, it was empty too! I recalled that my last Communion call had extra family members who received.

Then it hit me: This was a message from above: Jim you're out of spiritual juice. You're becoming forgetful of this place in thinking of the next place you'll be sent. Just tell them about it on Sunday — they'll understand. You've done enough. You've certainly preached long enough today! It's time to go to the next church, s as long as you give a good reason for the hope that is in you! Amen!

P.S. And special thanks for the beautiful blue stole! When I wear it, it will bring back good memories of the people of Saint John's an their dedicated work!!