



Last October, following the service in which I offered stewardship remarks, I was approached by a parishioner who observed that I had forcefully identified the reasons I remained at St. Mark's and asked if I would now be willing to share the journey that had brought me to our church. I thought to myself, well, that won't be happening. But here I sit, speaking to you via Zoom, wearing a white dress shirt—and sweat-pants. I didn't think that would be happening either. So, with your permission, I'll honor the parishioner's request: the road to St. Mark's. You will want to buckle up.

In 1973 I left graduate school, the dissertation more done with than done, returned to Richmond, took a job teaching in an Episcopal school, and joined an Episcopal church distinguished by its imposing architecture and historical associations. Wanting to get to know some of my fellow communicants, I made a personal commitment to attending coffee hour, every Sunday.

I am not a shy, retiring person, but I am reserved. I found it challenging to step into conversations with parishioners at least a generation older than I, who clearly had known each other many years, in some cases since childhood. So I would stand next to the coffee urn, smile, and try to look available. I was most often approached by parents of my students, hoping for an impromptu parent-teacher conference. The question then arises: in this overlapping work/worship world, did I feel at risk, vulnerable, being "other"? Not really, let me explain why.

The head of school who hired me left soon after I arrived, which I chose not to see as

Journey to St. Mark's

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cause and effect. His successor was one of the most articulate, urbane men I have ever known; he was also perceptive, and kind. At the end of the year, he asked me to stop by his office to read and sign my annual review, which I did, handing it back to him across his desk. He told me I had made a good beginning. He then stood, walked around his desk, turned the other visitor's chair facing mine, and sat. We were knee to knee, eye to eye. "This is a long-established Episcopal institution," he observed. "It is a polite work environment. It is highly improbable that anyone here will ask about your private life. I urge you not to volunteer it. Do you understand what I am saying to you, Howard?" "Yes, sir, I do. Thank you." My thank you was sincere because I understood what he was doing: he was trying to protect me. It was a job I had already grown to love and didn't want to lose. I would keep the promise I made that day, and that job, for thirty-five years. At church, then, I assumed that what worked for one Episcopal bastion would work for another. I remained cheerful, deferential—and guarded. A decade passed.

One Friday a friend of a friend called and invited me to attend mass with him Sunday evening at the Cathedral. I thanked him, of course, but reminded him that I was an Episcopalian and that the Catholic mass is closed to non-Catholics. He replied impatiently that he knew all that. But this mass was different, he told me: it was for Catholics and Episcopalians. There was a Catholic priest and an Episcopal priest, and the mass was just for us, us guys. I had questions.

"The Episcopal priest, is he affiliated with any of the churches in Richmond?" Colin replied that he didn't think so. The priest worked with the street people around VCU. "This mass, is it actually in the Cathedral?" I asked. "Not exactly: we are in the educational building next door. We use a classroom as our chapel." "The Bishop of Richmond, I inquired, "he's aware that there is an ecumenical mass being celebrated on Cathedral property for the Boys in the Band?" "Yep. He's cool with that." And he was, which may explain why the first act of his successor was to vaporize this particular mass. Colin then added that, after mass, we would all go to an Italian restaurant. I was seduced by curiosity, company, and cuisine.

There were perhaps fifteen of us in the makeshift chapel. I held the prayer book for the kid sitting next to me who was so nervous he was visibly shaking. He had confided that it was the first church service he had ever attended. We progressed through the Liturgy of the Word, coming finally to the Passing of the Peace, which, in

morning church, lasted twenty seconds: ten to smile and nod to the right, ten to the left. You can imagine my surprise when the Catholic priest stepped forward and hugged each of us, then the Episcopal priest hugged us, and then all of us were invited to hug each other. It was in the midst of this hug-fest that I experienced a shock of recognition.

When the service ended, the Episcopal priest came straight at me: “As I offered you the cup, I noticed you were crying. Are you all right?” “Yes,” I replied, “I was startled.” “By what? What startled you?” “I had not known what it would feel like to be fully accepted as a part of the body of Christ.” And so I learned to straddle: morning church for noble architecture, sung liturgy, and stimulating sermons; evening church for acceptance, companionship—and joy. Another decade passed.

By now I was living in the Museum District. One crisp, sun-filled March morning I decided to stroll to the church at the end of the street. It was my first visit to St. Mark’s. I remember the sincerity of the welcome; I remember walking to the pew where I still sit, when permitted. I assumed I wouldn’t know anyone. Yet, as I looked forward toward the lectern side, I recognized two profiles: a professor of British Literature at VCU, Lib Reynolds, and beside her the Episcopal priest from Sunday evening church, dissolved years before, Edward Meeks Gregory.

I greeted Pope--as he was universally known--following the service, and he told me he was a long-time member of St. Mark’s; he had even served as curate for almost eleven years. He then began to share with me what he loved about our church, and as he spoke, a sense of thanksgiving welled up inside me. I knew that my journey had come to an end: I was being allowed to come home.

There are excellent reasons why we should renew our pledges to St. Mark’s, even increase them, if personal circumstance allows. Obviously, no collection plates have been passed since last March, and so any increases in pledged income would be *MOST* welcome. When you are entering your pledge on-card or, preferably, online, I ask you to consider three factors. First, we have four exceptional priests and a committed, highly capable staff. I won’t belabor the obvious. Second, we have a long-range plan, parts of which have had to be deferred—not abandoned. We know who we are, we know where we are going, we know how to get there, and we will. Third, St. Mark’s is a relatively small church, but our compassion and generosity have a meaningful impact on the community we serve: we make a real difference in the lives

of many people, for whom St. Mark's is assuredly *not* closed.

To these three I will add a fourth: "Love is our tradition," which was adopted during our 150th anniversary as part of the church's rebranding process. "Love is our tradition" is a marketing tagline; it also happens to be true. When I joined St. Marks, twenty-seven years ago, love was already our tradition. It still is. In this Spirit-driven, righteous work, St. Mark's has not followed: we have led.

An acquaintance, a member of one of our larger conservative churches, recently informed me that St. Mark's is simply too welcoming: we welcome people who have left other Episcopal churches, other denominations, other religions; we even welcome the "unchurched and uncertain." I have given his criticism of St. Mark's considerable thought and leave you with the following.

I propose that St. Mark's change course, that we become more selective, that we only welcome those people—for whom our Lord died. And if they come to us hurt and in pain that we hold them fiercely until they are healed. Then we hold them forever.

Amen.

Howard Pugh, Stewardship Chair, October 11, 2020

love is our tradition