
I Have Been on a Retreat - Homecoming Now

A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
Homecoming Sunday: Proper 15 – Year B

Most of you have not seen me this past week. Well, I've been on retreat.

I've been on a retreat this past week. I've been on a retreat this past month. In fact, I've been on a retreat this past six months. I've been on a retreat this past twelve months, this past year. Yes, I think I've been on a retreat this past seventeen months! I think ALL of us have.

Many of us have been on retreats before, spiritual retreats, when we intentionally remove ourselves from our usual routines, when we can re-focus our lives, maybe learn something deeper about ourselves, and about God. Those retreats have often been life-changing. I encourage them.

But this retreat. These last seventeen months. This retreat, wow, has been unintentional, even forced upon us. Instead of living in tiny monastic cells, we have felt we were locked in cramped prison cells!

We are coming out of those cells now, I know. We are cautiously returning to routines, even as we encounter obstacles and setbacks almost daily. Setbacks like a return to wearing masks indoors. Caution among our friends. A recent upturn in covid cases. Fear, certainly fear, for our children under twelve years old who are not yet eligible for critical and marvelous vaccines. (Friends: let me remind you. Vaccines are your friends. Vaccinations are your friends! Hug one today!)

Today, as we observe Homecoming Sunday here at the Cathedral, and as we re-gather in schools and classes and prayer services, and even as we participate in public baptisms on this glorious day, let me review with you some of what I have learned during my long, seventeen month retreat.

At the beginning, in March of 2020, I learned that safety can involve being uncomfortable. There is a discomfort in doing things like wearing masks. But they save lives. I remember long ago in the 1960s, when our culture, and our law, began mandating seat belts in cars. They were amazingly uncomfortable, at first; but they saved lives. Here at the Cathedral, we called our season, the season of "Social Distance For the Common Good."

On Good Friday, 2020, the sermon was titled, "The Resurrection Begins Inside Us," and I preached about what various people have learned on retreat -- in prison! In Lord Byron's poem, *The Prisoner of Chillon*, he said, "A long communion tends to make us what we are." We were starting a long, imprisoned communion, and we were learning who we were, the good and the bad. I remembered Anne Frank, locked in an attic, and who was able to say things like: "I've found that there is always some beauty left -- in nature, sunshine, freedom, in yourself; these can all help you." And she said, "In spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart." I mentioned Nelson Mandela, who said, "If I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind," said Mandela, "I'd still be in prison." The Resurrection begins inside us, and Easter always begins in the darkness.

By the summer of 2020, last summer, we were all stuck. And we missed each other. The Cathedral was doing a magnificent job producing online services, and livestreaming things. But it was clear to most of us that online experiences --as splendid as they might be--are no substitute for actually sitting with each other in church. A year ago, I wrote an article for the Atlanta Journal-Constitution about what "essential services" are; I claimed that church services, gatherings of different people in spiritual community, are essential services in our polarized culture!

I wrote: "Worshipping God ... teaches us that we are not the be-all and end-all of life. Our positions, and our

opinions, are not the only good ones around. The opinions of others, some praying right beside us!—are part of the community. Forgiving others, and being forgiven, are also part of the community.”

“When we begin to lose this sense of community, our voices become more random and untethered. ...When people lose community, we become “idiots.” When we lose community, we lose the capacity to experience and understand people who are different from us; instead, we experience only our own selves, only our own opinions, only our own perspectives.” (We were saying this last year, a year before the New York Times printed much the same thing from a religious observer last week.)

On my seventeen month retreat, I encountered the same inner demons that I always seem to encounter on retreats. I realized again my own impatience. I have faced it daily! Without distractions, I have faced again my demons: anger, bitterness, resentment, envy, and even the old stand-bys, sloth and gluttony. They are all in me. Retreats, even the unintentional ones, provide an opportunity to acknowledge those demons, admit them, and turn from them.

My watchword, our watchword, became: “First, no judgement.” Don’t be hard on myself. Don’t be hard on ourselves. Don’t be hard on others. We are all struggling.

Today, we are baptizing people in a large, congregational service for the first time in seventeen months! The Christian Church has a long history of different baptism practices. In the past, sometimes the person being baptized took a long forty-day retreat, where he or she learned to encounter just those sins that needed to be discarded, turned away from. A healthy baptized person knows, and realizes, just what he or she is renouncing.

And let me review a strange baptism practice. At one time in Christian history, some adults refused to be baptized until they were about to die. Why? Because they figured that when they fell back into sin after their baptism, they would lose their baptism and it wouldn’t be valid. Constantine the Great, for instance, remained a catechumen, unbaptized, until just before he died.

It took a while for the Christian tradition to accept that baptism does not make us perfect, forever. We are not immune from sin just because we are baptized. We are still imperfect, and imperfected, strugglers in the faith.

Well, I have learned a lot about imperfection, too, in these last seventeen months of my retreat. I’ve learned that there is a virus, maybe what some people call, a severe “cancel culture” virus, that demands that everyone be perfect, all the time. That culture, often madly driven by the over-dramatic media, is impatient with imperfection. So, many of us are unable to tolerate imperfection anymore. Politically speaking, I have grown tired of both the conservative and the liberal extremists, cancellers on both sides.

What I have learned on retreat is that all of us human beings are imperfect, no matter how, or how many times, we have been baptized. The healthy among us are at least self-aware. We acknowledge and even bewail our shortcomings every week, together, and we seek to re-engage life and love over and over again.

These baptisms that we celebrate today are the beginnings of a new life, a new process of repentance and renewal, over and over again. We start a pattern, a pattern of renewal, in our baptisms; we don’t simply proclaim each other cleansed for all time. That’s why we all renew our own baptismal vows on these days – all of us together, in community.

This past January 6, 2021, was a frighteningly hard day in our country. The Sunday afterward was the Feast of the Baptism of Christ, the Jesus who said that, “Whoever would be great among you must be servant of all.” On that day, I noted that:

“We worship Jesus, not the Jesus whose name gets posted up on a banner carried by thugs. No, we worship the Jesus who was not distracted by adulation or self-importance or narcissism as he began his ministry. He was not distracted by whatever was simply available before him. Today, Jesus shows us the art of paying attention to what needs attention: order and righteousness, grace and truth, self-giving love.”

“On this feast day, the Feast Day of the Baptism of Christ, we remember how Jesus began his ministry. And in our remembrance, we commit to beginning anew as well. ...No matter who we are, no matter how many times we have re-begun before, no matter how many times we have re-set, no matter how many times we have been born again, the vows of baptism offer us a chance to begin anew, to begin again, again.”

It’s been a long, seventeen month retreat. Thank you for sharing it with me. Thank you for sharing it, even when we have not seen each other, not been able to hug and kiss each other. Thank you, for learning with me what I said this past March, on the first day that we gathered back together for worship inside the Cathedral.

Remember that glorious day? I said that, “We are meant to practice the encountering of spiritual disease,especially when we take on spiritual disciplines and retreats. We are supposed to face the spiritual diseases in our own lives....,not avoid them...The way to defeat them is to learn to acknowledge them, even the slightest touch of them, before they grow into more deadly diseases. Our admission and confession is what inoculates us from their larger expressions!”

I urged us, in community, to bear the pain of each other. “Every time we bear another person’s burden, we are being the vaccine for that other person. Like Jesus, every time we bear another person’s burden, we are being a vaccine for that other person. In acknowledging the burdens of that other person, sharing them, we are somehow enabling that person, that body, that system, to become healthy. It’s a holy miracle....And when we help that other person to be healthy, even just one other person, we are helping the entire world to be healthy.”

My retreat, our retreat, our seventeen month retreat, is almost over. Oh, I so hope it is almost over! But I also hope I have learned again, over and over, what I was saying at the very beginning, on Good Friday of the year 2020. I repeat it now:

“In this season of contagion, we sure have discovered lots of things that are contagious! The coronavirus is, for sure. Yes, viruses are contagious! But so are lots of other, good, things! Peace is contagious! Anxiety is contagious, but so is Calm! Fear is contagious, but so is Love. And, finally, self-knowledge. Self-knowledge, inner awareness, knowledge of yourself, is contagious. The more we realize who we, ourselves, truly are – the more people around us will realize who they themselves truly are! Self-awareness is contagious.”

I said those things seventeen months ago; but now, maybe, “the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time.”

We are coming back home. We are coming back home, to ourselves, and –I pray—in a renewed and enlightened way. We have been on retreat, and it is time to come home, in the renewal of our baptismal vows and in the renewal in our hope of resurrection. Homecoming 2021 is begun. Happy Homecoming!

AMEN.