

St. James' Episcopal Church, Milwaukee
Closing Eucharist Sermon
All Saints' Day, 2017
The Rev. Ian Burch

I have a brother with whom I have almost nothing in common. When we were kids, he was into sports, girls, and expensive sound systems. I was on honor roll, loved church, and read all the time. He is four years older than me, but my hair is grayer. He attends church four times a year; I'm a priest. He is thin and athletic, and I've never met a chocolate cake I wouldn't sample. We're opposites.

And we didn't get along too well when we were kids. It wasn't that we disliked each other; it was more that, with so little in common, what would we do together? What would we talk about?

In our 20s, we drifted apart. I was in the seminary, and he and his wife had a baby on the way. There just wasn't much overlap in our stories.

Then our dad got sick. Many of you know the drill—chemo, surgeries, doctors, therapy, and the constant assault on dignity and peace that cancer brings.

After our dad died, I noticed that my brother and I talked on the phone a lot more. Even though we hadn't changed very much, I noticed that we started relating in a deeper and kinder way. We started to build a wonderful relationship. And I had a traitorous thought—what if something good has come from our dad's death? Isn't that gruesome? What if something good came from all the suffering?



The Rev. Ian Burch, preaching

Today, my brother and I are incredibly close. I sometimes wonder if that would be true if we hadn't experienced death together.

Of course, that's the scandal of our faith—that there's more to any story. Dad's death wasn't the end of our family story. Life and grace abounded in the face of death, even when that seemed impossible. Just ask the Gospels. The blind see. The persecuted will rule the kingdom of heaven. The meek inherit the earth. The dead rise. These are the impossible truths we profess each Sunday—the truths proclaimed at St. James' for well over a century. It's the new fire of Easter in this darkened sanctuary. It's the cry of countless generations of babies baptized in that font. It's the train of coffins rolled up this aisle while we sing alleluia in the face of death. It's in the countless tens of thousands of pastoral visits launched from these doors that have spread through the world like ripples of resurrection. We are a scandalous people, my friends. We believe that death isn't the end of the story. And that

belief won't change when we leave this room.

I see a group of people who refused to believe that homelessness and poverty in this city were too big to overcome. I see people who affirmed the dignity of our queer siblings long before it was fashionable. I see people who have worked to offer succor and support to housing insecure friends and neighbors, even when the odds seemed against those efforts. I see people who have gone out in faith in the face of changing demographics and dwindling church participation all over the country. I see the committed group of St. James' faithful leaders doing vital ministry until even the last day of their life as a parish. I see a people who believe that the Gospel hope is true. That, contrary to what the world might say, God will bring something good out of death. God will bring something good out of death.

I'm not sure where these ripples of resurrection will continue to spread after we leave tonight. I know that two of the ministries have already found new homes at Trinity in Wauwatosa and nearby at the Cathedral. I know that this parish has asked that some of its monies be spent by the diocese for outreach in perpetuity. I also know another place where the legacy of St. James' will flourish for years to come. Many of you know the Reverend Dorota Pruski, priest of the church and daughter of St. James'. She's serving the people of God in Haiti tonight, but I asked her for some reflections on St. James'. She writes this:

It's been a nutty couple of weeks, and as I write you now I'm about to board a plane to Haiti so pardon the brevity here.

St. James' was my entry into the Episcopal Church. My first Sunday there was Epiphany of 2007, and I came starving for a faith community. What I found was more life and joy and love than I thought could exist in a church. I found people who loved Jesus and knew their calling to be one of service and mission. And I found my own vocation there as well. When I tell the story of my call, I speak of St. James' as a place where people loved me well enough to hold up mirrors to me, encouraging me to see myself the way they saw me—as one called to ordained ministry. I believe God would have reached me eventually, but St James' and Mthr. Debra Trakel were a speedy conduit of God's grace.

St. James' is the only Episcopal church I've ever been a member of, and it is with sadness and gratitude that I write these brief words. I love that community fiercely, and I'm sorry



The Very Rev. Kevin Carroll, presiding; the Rev. Kevin Stewart, deacon; John Washbush, subdeacon

others won't get to experience the love and care that I did there. Whatever parishes members of St James' end up at will be lucky to have them.

God has a way of turning the hardest moments into grace. We're celebrating tonight with all the mighty saints of God who have stood in this room, who have cared for one another, who have broken bread and shared wine. We are communing with all those who have gone before and for whom these four walls have been home. We are praying with the generations who have prayed here before. And even in our grief, God gives us grace.

Every altar that holds bread and wine is St. James' altar. Every font that carries water is St. James' font. That is the economy of God. That's the trick of grace. Even when we close doors, we cannot close out the breath of God that will speed us on our way as we find new houses of worship. God will make something of this day, just like God makes something of every day ever lived.

You have done the good work of loving each other and loving God. Nothing more is required. Upon those two things hang all the law and prophets. And you have done it my friends in Christ.

Look upon this place with pride; with sadness; with love; with devotion; and with the radical Easter hope that says this story is far from over. Grace cannot be stopped. Amen.