

St. Thomas's Episcopal Church
Newark, DE
Tenth Sunday after Pentecost – August 2, 2015/Year B
2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a; Psalm 51:1-13; Ephesians 4:1-16; John 6:24-35
The Reverend Paul W. Gennett, Jr.

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May my words reveal the greater glory of God.

AMEN

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A funny thing happened on the way ... For those of a riper vintage of life, we may remember the classic 1966 musical comedy starring Zero Mostel. Others might go a bit deeper in time to those **Road to ...** movies starring Bob Hope, Bing Crosby, and Dorothy Lamour. Each one is filled with unsuspected events, meeting new and interesting people along the way, and experiencing wonderful outcomes when they stay open to what comes along.

A funny thing happened on the way ... Although different in many ways, my past ninety days journeying along sabbatical road has found many similarities to these cinematic examples. My days were filled with unexpected events, MANY new and interesting people met along the way, experiencing wonderful discoveries around and in myself as I stayed open to what was offered along sabbatical road.

A funny thing happened on the way ... So my returning sermon today will offer a brief reflection on these experiences and gifts of sabbatical time. I am not sure it will find root or connection to our scripture today, but you usually cannot go too far wrong when you have Jesus as the “*bread of life*.” Yet like my journey, I invite you to hold this loosely and join me in seeing where the journey takes us.

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First and foremost, I am deeply grateful to the people of St. Thomas's, our Wardens and Vestry, Emily Gibson, Elizabeth Masterson, and Deacon Cecily, and our staff who did exactly as I expected by **carrying on the care and feeding of our parish family with grace and strength**. While I have “earned” this time of sabbatical as part of our agreement when I was called in 2008, it still is a great grace for you to gather the resources in time, money, and talent to make this happen. In speaking with other priests along Sabbatical Road, many recognized the “contractual” part of sabbatical time, but the parish had not, or could not, provide the support needed to make this happen. This is an important part of our parish being **healthy and whole** spiritually and physically, and I thank you again.

I am not going to recount all the details of these 90 days along Sabbatical Road during today's sermon. I will plan for a special forum time for this purpose, supported by my many photos that don't hold a candle to Bob Gilley's pictures, but they will have to do, and portions of my Sabbatical Road reflections, one parishioner noting that I was **channeling Jack Kerouac** – I was not even close on that one other than the “road” metaphor! However, there were a few emergent

themes and experiences that have taken root in this soul and I suspect will emerge in ministry with you as we continue to write this chapter of St. Thomas's parish history.

So, here are these reflections and not in not any particular order, just as they are ...

- **We have a breathtaking world around us when we just STOP, LOOK, AND LISTEN.** I know how often I get caught up in how terminally important the work is that I am doing so that I forget that, first and foremost, God created me as a human BEING! It was in the silence of my 2008 Jeep Patriot Chapel – which performed admirably for 7200 miles with only the Kansas alternator incident – I could simply absorb all that surrounded me along the roads of our country. Vast open spaces and farmlands of the Midwest ... Rocky Mountain highs that you now can get in Denver as well just by walking down the streets ... the stark and majestic high desert landscape of New Mexico and West Texas ... the city life of Denver, Santa Fe, Albuquerque, Phoenix, and a few others that just moved a bit more slowly and carefully than we do on the East Coast. My sabbatical journal is filled with many of these moments, and not-even-close-to-Peter Griess drawings to capture what filled my eyes, my heart, and my soul. Although different, these self-same God created gifts surround you and me this day, in this place, and all around us. We just need to **STOP, LOOK, LISTEN, and BE!**
- I spent much time in **silence and solitude ... but NEVER alone!** The principal reason I felt this was not by some mystical Julian of Norwich moment. I know many were concerned I might come back CRAZY [my question was “crazier than before?”], but by the simple action of holding the picture of the Good Shepherd, and **praying for and with each of you** through the Parish Directory. I read a poem by Devon Duggan written when she visited Christ in the Desert Monastery while I was there. I was close to Jordan Kinsey and Christopher as I traveled the flatlands of Kansas. I felt the presence of Deacon Cecily's sons in Denver, and John Killingsworth's family as I drove around Georgia Tech campus. I was hoping to bring back a souvenir baseball from the Triple A Albuquerque Isotope game on Father's Day for John Werner and daughter Elizabeth, but I do have the ticket stub for them. While we talk about our “family of faith” at St. Thomas's, I encourage you to do as I did and **PRAY** the directory each day in the months ahead. **It will change how you see and be with this your family.**
- **There are a lot of VERY HUNGRY PEOPLE waiting to be fed.** While the issue of hunger and homelessness is just as stark and needful in the places I visited as it is here, this was not the principal **hunger** I experienced. In many conversations along the highways and by-ways traveled, many desired to experience the presence of the Holy in their lives by meeting **wholly broken people** to share their stories of hope, faith, and belief. In many spiritual stops on my travels, the communities I found with great health and vibrancy were those who saw me as the stranger and **immediately welcomed me** into their midst. As I spoke with people in these settings and learned of their faith journey, the constant thread in all these stories was that **another person shared their story of life and faith, and invited them to experience the same in their own way.** In their own way these people, like you and me, took the *bread of life* and then BECAME this bread to others. It struck me while attending one of many 12 step meetings along the way that these spiritual health communities spoke as many do in the 12 step rooms – **Hi, I'm Paul, and I am a Christian.** Not in ways of self-righteousness, demeaning the “other” and their spiritual experience, but simply **naming and claiming who we are by knowing**

WHOSE we are. If those first followers of Jesus had not done the same in their own wholly broken ways, we would not be here today.

As I mentioned, **more will be revealed** at a time in local theaters, more likely the Great Hall, when I will share my experiences more deeply. Here is one thing that did emerge clearly in deeper reflection on my life and ministry then, now, and yet to come. First, there are a number of ways I can and will serve God and the church in my future through spiritual companioning and retreat offerings, in leadership development and wellness with clergy and lay leaders, and even dipping back again perhaps into the “corporate world.” That said, the discernment arising will be COMING ATTRACTIONS for now, as I am clearly called to finish with you the chapter of our time together at St. Thomas’s. This was clear, and is my calling for the days ahead, and for this clarity, I am grateful.

There are a lot of VERY HUNGRY PEOPLE waiting to be fed. These people are in our community now, they are your neighbors and friends. They are strangers who like to say they are **spiritual but not religious**, yet ache for a community of faithful whose lives reflect the *bread of life* we share at this table. They are people like you and me, just waiting for you to share the story of God that you are in your wholly broken way. They are just waiting to hear you and I say ... **Hi, I’m _____, and I am a Christian.**

AMEN