

Sermon preached at St. John's Episcopal Church, West Hartford, CT

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What is this Church where we have come to worship God today? Why do we come here? And why have Carla and Iakovos Katsipis brought their little son Raphael here to be baptized? Why do we gather here on Farmington Avenue and not on a hillside? (Although last week I overheard one of you evangelists say that she comes to St. John's because it is air-conditioned!)

Well, some of us come here because it is a place where we learn our Christian faith, where little Raphael can learn his prayers and the stories of Moses and Noah, of Matthew, Mark, Luke and our own St. John. Some come here because this is a Christian community where folks share our values and help us navigate the difficult problems of immigration and refugees, help us find a Christian approach to providing health care and combatting racism. Some come here to make friends, and some come because their parents came, and church is part of their family tradition. Some have a conviction that what Jesus said is right, that from those to whom much has been given, much is expected, and so they come here to support St. John's missions in the world and in this neighborhood.

Last winter, you may have heard, that my husband and I spent almost five months on a cruise ship. Now since ancient times, a ship has been a symbol of the church, the church being the vessel that carries us across the stormy seas of life to a safe harbor. The place where you are seated is called the nave, from the Latin for ship, as in the word navy. Even the roof over your head in the nave is designed to look like the inside of a ship's hull. But in addition to the theological reasons to connect church and ship, and in addition to the architectural design of many churches, there are quite a few other parallels between church life and shipboard life. Think about the common perception of the church as an institution that exists to provide its members with various spiritual services: to provide worship that comforts and inspires, pastoral care in time of crisis or transition (*i.e.* hatching, matching, and dispatching), and religious training for the young. All of this is done under the management of the clergy who serve as combination captains and cruise directors of this ecclesiastical ship. The laity are the ship's passengers who have the duty of participating in shipboard activities and, of course, paying the fares to keep the ship afloat. Exceptionally devoted passengers will also help out from time to time with shipboard chores and other responsibilities.

Today's Gospel, however, challenges us to a radically different understanding of the Church and its ministry. Jesus gives the Church a mission that is far beyond the maintenance of an institution; Jesus gives the Church a mission that is directed not at those who are the Church's members but at those who are not. Jesus tells us that where we are called is not to the pool deck but to the port.

Luke tells us that Jesus appointed seventy people "and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place." He said to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; ... See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. ... Whenever you enter a town ... cure the sick who are there, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.'" Note that Jesus did not tell his disciples to go to the Diocesan offices and meet with the Canon to the Ordinary or to go meet with the wardens and Vestry of their local parish. Jesus gives his disciples the same mission that he himself began - to transform the world through the proclamation of the Gospel, to put God's love and power into action so that the world becomes what God intended it to be. Services of worship, educational programs, pastoral care, and church buildings are all necessary and wonderful means of carrying out the Church's mission, but they are not ends in themselves.

Jesus' ministry was directed outward toward the world around him. Jesus' heart went out to all us needy human beings who are "like sheep without a shepherd," and so he told us good news about God's boundless compassion and love for the whole world. As a sign of God's love and a demonstration of God's power, Jesus healed the sick and cast out demons. And then, because he knew that he would not always be with us, THEN he sent out seventy apostles and commanded them to go and continue his work.

Those seventy are the beginning of the church, the Body of Christ into which we baptize Raphael Jacob Katsipis this morning, a church whose members are sent out to the whole world as ministers of the Gospel.

Ministry is what the people of St. John's do when they rehab houses for Habitat for Humanity. They don't just pound nails and saw wood; like Jesus, the carpenter of Nazareth, they embody the love of God that heals and gives hope.

Ministry is what members of this parish do when they fill our wagon with food and pull it to the altar, and when they prepare and serve meals to the hungry at Loaves and Fishes. They do far more than make casseroles and cookies. They give flesh to the Gospel; they bring the love of God with a human face.

Ministry is why we support Grace Academy and Covenant Prep, why we have ESOL, English for Speakers of Other Languages. We don't just offer our selves and our resources to teach curriculum; we do it to teach people that they are valuable and worthy of education.

Ministry is what parents do with their children and what we do with our neighbors when we are trustworthy and patient, tender and compassionate, honest and loving.

Ministry is what all of us are called to do as we go about our daily lives. Ministry is treating people with respect and fairness and conducting our business with integrity. Ministry is giving our employer an honest day's work, making use of our God-given talents. Ministry is being responsible citizens of our town, our state, and our country. Ministry is living joyfully, thankfully, unselfishly, peacefully, shining light into a dark world and making the kingdom of God come on earth as it is in heaven.

Ministry is a much, much bigger enterprise than running the institutional Church, and once the water is poured onto our heads, once we are baptized, ministry is our job. Christ needs us all, even little Raphael, because the mission of Christ is to heal the big world that Christ calls us all to serve. So let us begin.