



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
The Right Reverend Dean E. Wolfe, *Rector*

The Feast of Saint Bartholomew

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, September 17, 2017

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Based on Deuteronomy 18:15-18, Psalm 91:1-4, 11-12, 1 Corinthians 4: 9-15, Luke 22:24-30

Come, Holy Spirit, and kindle the fire that is in us.

Take our lips and speak through them.

Take our hearts and see through them.

Take our souls and set them on fire. Amen.

One thing's for certain. Nobody bothered to call the bishop. The people who founded Saint Bartholomew's parish in 1835 didn't take the time to secure Episcopal permission to do so. They didn't do a survey. They didn't take a poll. They didn't do a demographic analysis of the neighborhood. A group of devoted Episcopalians from different parishes simply came together in faith and decided they were called to start a new church.

Paying five dollars for rent, they met in Military Hall in the Bowery for divine worship on January 11, 1835, and then again on January 18th. On Monday, January 19th they held elections for the Wardens. They believed the city of New York needed a church and, by God (literally!), they started one. (And, it might be said, Saint Bart's has never paid much attention to the rules—or to bishops—ever since.)

In the 1890's, Rector David Hummel Greer preached a sermon in which he proclaimed, "The greatest benefactor of the human race is the (one) who gives the noblest visions to it." And Greer offered noble visions. He not only talked the talk, but he walked the walk. Through his servant leadership, he made Saint Bart's a home of liberal Christianity. He led St. Bart's in welcoming countless refugees to New York, and during his tenure here, services were conducted in six different languages every Sunday (along with occasional services in Turkish and Persian). Talk about audacious mission! The parish provided outreach and legal aid to 4000 Chinese immigrants a year and provided a spiritual home for thousands of people who couldn't find a warm welcome anywhere else in this city.

More than one hundred years later, Saint Bart's continues this tradition of radical welcome by providing straight, gay, lesbian, and transgendered people a safe place to grow in the Christian faith. People of every income and educational level, people of every race and nation are welcomed in this great and holy space. And, along the way, succeeding rectors bent Church canon by offering Communion to every one of every age and every circumstance, in an attempt to open the doors of this church as wide as possible. What would Jesus do? We may not always know, but we're pretty sure Jesus would love the people he created, and he would make room for God's beloved creation. It was believed then, as it is to this very day, that folks on a pilgrimage towards God don't need any more roadblocks than the ones they've already encountered. Here we are working hard to put aside the roadblocks. Those of you who were told you were not good enough, you were not white or black or brown enough, you were not theologically correct enough, you were not rich enough, you were not straight enough: This is your house.

Jesus said, "...The greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves." Today we're celebrating the Feast of Saint Bartholomew, the saint after whom we are named and who, truth be told, we don't really know much about. Episcopalians may not remember the saints with quite the same intensity as our Roman Catholic friends, but we do try to take as examples leaders of the faith who have gone before us and lift them up as examples for our own lives. We do know Bartholomew is listed among the original 12 disciples. We believe he may have written a gospel, but we don't have a copy of it. We know he's the patron saint of plasterers, although why he's the patron saint of plasterers remains a mystery.

Scholars and ancient sources suggest Bartholomew was actually Nathanael bar Tolmai, the very Nathanael who was Philip's friend, the one who skeptically wondered, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip invites him to, "come and see." And after a brief encounter with Jesus, Nathanael/Bartholomew exclaims, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Jesus responds, "You will see greater things than these." Bartholomew truly did see greater things, including the Resurrected Christ himself, walking along the Sea of Tiberias.

What we do know is that Bartholomew is our namesake. And we lovingly refer to this church as "St. Bart's" because there's something in the informality and the warmth of it which communicates an important part of who we are and who we always hope to be.

Jesus said, "...The greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves." This morning, there are dozens of people who'll be standing at tables after this service to talk with you about ways in which you can become more deeply engaged in this community of faith. There are dozens of things you can do, dozens of things you can "try on for size." You can assist with the altar guild, you can be an usher, you can help us connect newcomers to this community, you can assist those in need in our soup kitchen, pantry, or shelter. And that's just a small sample of what is available.

Now, I know, that some of you are already doing so many things here that you hardly have time to turn around. And some of you need to take a little breather. But some of you are just waiting to be asked, waiting to discover a ministry that will strengthen your connection to God and your fellow human beings. These ministries don't just benefit other folks; this is for you and your own soul's sake, too.

The best leaders have always been the ones who didn't depend upon their seniority. The best leaders have always been the ones who didn't act as though they were all that impressed with themselves. The best leaders have a way of making every single person they encounter feel valued and loved. The best leaders know, "The greatest benefactor of the human race is the one who gives the noblest visions to it." And they love offering noble visions.

There's an old story I like about an old stone monastery tucked away in the middle of a beautiful forest. For many years people would make the significant detour required to seek out this monastery. The peaceful spirit of this place was healing for the soul. In recent years, however, fewer and fewer people were making their way to the monastery. The monks had grown a little jealous and petty in their relationships with one another, and the animosity was being sensed by those who visited.

The Abbot of the monastery was deeply distressed by what was happening, and he poured out his heart to his good friend Jeremiah. Jeremiah was a wise old Jewish rabbi and, having heard the Abbot's tale of woe, he asked if he could offer a suggestion. "Please do!" responded the Abbot. "Anything you can offer!" Jeremiah said that he had received a vision, an important and holy vision, and the vision was this: the Messiah was among the ranks of the monks.

The Abbot was flabbergasted. One among his own was truly the Messiah! Who could it be? He knew it wasn't himself. But who? He raced back to the monastery and shared his exciting news with his fellow monks. The monks grew silent as they looked into each other's faces. Was this one the Messiah? Or this one? From that day forward, the mood in the monastery changed. Joseph and Ivan started talking again, neither

wanting to be guilty of slighting the Messiah. Pierre and Naibu left behind their frosty anger and sought out each other's forgiveness. The monks began serving each other, looking for opportunities to assist one another, seeking healing and forgiveness wherever offence had been given.

As one traveler, then another, found their way to the monastery, word soon spread about the remarkable spirit of the place. People once again took the journey to the monastery and found themselves renewed and transformed. All because those monks knew the Messiah was among them.

I believe the Messiah is among us. I believe God is revealing God's self in fresh and remarkable ways in this very place. Over the next year, we will engage in a strategic planning process to better understand what God is calling us to do. We will hear what God is whispering into the ears of people who've loved this congregation and who've been a part of it for many, many years. And we will hear what God is telling people who are here this morning for the very first time.

The Apostle Paul wrote to those feisty Corinthians, "We are fools for the sake of Christ, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. ¹¹ To the present hour we are hungry and thirsty, we are poorly clothed and beaten and homeless, ¹² and we grow weary from the work of our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; ¹³ when slandered, we speak kindly." Fools for the sake of Christ. "When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we speak kindly." Paul understood spiritual leadership was a real and crucial gift, and he knew it was always costly. It did not come without a price because it was of such precious value.

In his autobiography, *A Life in Our Times*, economist John Kenneth Galbraith wrote about the devotion of Emily Wilson, his family's long-time housekeeper. It had been a very long day, and Galbraith came home and asked Emily to fend off all his telephone calls so he could take a nap. Ten minutes later the phone rang; it was Lyndon Johnson on the telephone calling from the White House.

"Get me Ken Galbraith. This is Lyndon Johnson." And Emily replied, "He's sleeping, Mr. President. He said not to disturb him." "Well, wake him up. I want to talk to him." There was a pause.... "No, Mr. President. I work for him, not you." Later, when Galbraith finally returned the President's call, an impressed Johnson told him, "Tell that woman. I want her working here in the White House." "

It's good to know for whom you work. There is nothing quite like that kind of extraordinarily loyal, servant leadership, offered by a person who seeks only to dependably and devotedly serve. And anyone—everyone—should be able to deeply appreciate and respect that kind of loyal and faithful service.

I don't know if we will serve thousands of immigrants or lead worship in different languages. What I do believe is this: our best days are not behind us.

Helen Keller, that great activist, wrote, "No pessimist ever discovered the secrets of the stars, or sailed to an uncharted land, or opened a new heaven to the human spirit."

Simplicity and sincerity may have been Bartholomew's greatest gifts. In fact, they may have been his only qualifications. "And (of course) he was called."

Those may well be our greatest gifts and our only qualifications as well. Simplicity and faithfulness. And, of course, being called.

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