

Kathy Wynn
Saint Martin's Church, Radnor, PA
4 Epiphany, January 29, 2012

Lectionary:

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

Psalm 111

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Mark 1:21-28

We Are the Church: A Parishioner Ponders

Good morning! And welcome to Congregation Sunday!

Many of you know that I have been teaching Sunday School at Saint Martin's for a while. I had never taught anything before that, so one of the first things I did was to reach back into my Sunday School memories and teach my class of preschoolers that old Sunday School standby: Here is the church, here is the steeple. Open the doors, and see all the people.

I see why everybody learns this when they are a child in Sunday School. It's brilliant. Here is the church. It's a building, right? But watch the miraculous transformation: It's not a building after all. The church is all the people inside it! Lots of active, wiggly people! They're excited.

Today is our Congregation Sunday, when our purpose is to explore the idea that we are the church, that we parishioners are Saint Martin's. I know it means something more than the fact that we all make our way to this place on most Sunday mornings. But what more does it mean?

I began thinking about what "church" means one day last summer. Bobby and Chloe were swimming in our pool, and they were arguing. And nothing I said made an impact. Then I got a Bible, and I called them over to sit on a ledge in the pool and read, hoping to bring peace and harmony to our house. But the sight of the Bible and the notion of reading it in the pool in the middle of a summer weekday were totally strange to Bobby and Chloe. "This isn't church!" they said.

It was one of those phrases that starts you thinking. I knew there was something wrong with it. Church is not confined to a building at 400 King of Prussia Road or the hours of 10 to 12 on Sunday. That's just too small.

In the months that have passed since that summer day, I have felt a growing desire to explore the idea of church and to be active as a member of Saint Martin's. A few circumstances,

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coming together, brought me to this desire. For one, we are writing a new chapter in the life of Saint Martin's. We are under new, energetic, ambitious, and above all, spiritual leadership. Chris has been asking us, why are we here? What are we passionate about? We have begun the process of re-creating the mission of our church. This mission is inward-looking for our spiritual development, and outward-looking for the development of our stewardship of God's world. This is exciting, and I want to be part of it.

There are other things going on in my life that make me want to explore and experiment with what it means to be a member of Saint Martin's. My children are growing and encountering the stress of what it means to be human. I want to guide them with love and wisdom. How can I be a better parent? How can I be a loving, guiding presence, a blessing to Bobby and Chloe? How can I nurture their spirits so they grow into thoughtful, compassionate, thriving people at peace in themselves and a blessing to the world? How can I help them find peace of the spirit when I myself am yearning and seeking for it? How can I reconcile myself to the powerful joys and sorrows of life?

I sense that some of the answers are here in this community, to be discovered by being part of this community. Because here I find people and calls to action that point the way to knowing something about the big mystery of God and life.

In the Old Testament reading today, Moses reminds the Israelites that they asked God to provide intermediaries because the direct experience of God was too terrible. The Israelites needed a human voice and face to relate to God. God said the people were right, and He would put His words in the mouth of the prophet.

Two weeks ago in Sunday School we read about young Samuel being called by God to be a prophet. We paused to learn what the word "prophet" means. I had to stop myself when I almost said that "prophets" were people whom God called to speak for him *long ago*. I might be the only one here who believes it, but I think God is still making prophets, and I expect to hear them at Saint Martin's. I believe this because I know so many faithful people here who live with openness to God, asking him to shape their lives and actions. And even if you aren't asking to be God's mouthpiece, you just might be the one he chooses. Like Samuel.

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It seems to me that this is part of what it means to be a church: We impart and receive, to and from each other, the word, the love, and the power of God. We spend time together; we come to know each other. We see life through each other's eyes and experiences.

Some years ago, Joyce Lundquist joined my Sunday School classes with her granddaughters Megan and Maddie. Week after week, Joyce has been with us and added to our class her faithfulness, her capable set of extra hands, her gentle, kind, firm voice, and a calm wisdom that grew through years of nurturing her children, her husband, pets, farm animals, and grandchildren through joys and sorrows that Joyce only ever hints at. But her presence with us in Sunday School through the years has articulated God's grace and his commandment of faithfulness eloquently.

To be sure, as potential prophets, you and I may be just as deaf to God's call as Samuel was at first. As potential listeners to the prophets around us, we may be similarly deaf. On this point, the gospel of Mark this morning resonates. Mark tells us that the early followers of Jesus were "astounded" and "amazed" by his "new teaching--with authority." This "authority" broke through their deafness, caught their attention, and convinced them that something special and even extraordinary was going on with this man, Jesus.

In this community of Saint Martin's, do we believe we have authority to speak and act the word of God? Well, it's a little late to be asking that question, because this morning, we have created our entire worship service. Monty Harris even wrote a creed encapsulating what we believe, which today will take the place of the Nicene Creed.

You're thinking, he WHAT? Who do these people think they are? In other words, what is our authority?

I'll tell you what I think. God not only authorizes this Congregation Sunday, he requires it. He commanded us to love him with all our hearts, and to love one another. To me, those commandments lead us squarely to this service, where we take responsibility for expressing our love to God. And equally, those commandments lead us squarely to the Ministry Fair that follows this service, where we can explore and make commitments to the ministries that are active in this church, through which we express and enact our love for our neighbor and for God.

And, being involved in these ministries, I have discovered, can bring moments that pierce our deafness to God and his prophets. Here is an example. One Friday afternoon before

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Christmas, the Sunday School gathered to make "critters," which are small creatures made out of things like pine cones, horse chestnuts, berries, dried vines, and acorns, which I had been gathering throughout November and storing in shoe boxes in our garage like a squirrel (much to Matt's dismay). Our kids took these bits and pieces of nature and put them together into creations that expressed, consciously or not, their views of life.

Megan Lundquist created a bird's nest with three scarlet holly berries as eggs, which, when you think about it, is a beautiful reflection of her faith in birth and rebirth. Chloe made a hamster with a smile that stretched from one acorn ear to the other. She showed us her view that we creatures are meant to be happy. Bobby made a snake, carefully placing two tiny parallel twigs for fangs below two round berries that made a very non-threatening pair of bug eyes. This one took some puzzling, but I think it reflects Bobby's faith that there is a way to meet fear and pain, that they don't have to defeat us. These messages seem simple, but the more I think about them, the more they echo like the words of a prophet.

My ministry that day--and the ministry of Chris Delaney and Joyce Lundquist, who joined me in working with the kids--our ministry was to listen to the voices of our children and to nurture the pure faith that lives in their hearts. You can see how this ministry has the potential to bring about real goodness in the world. Our children will spread and enact their belief in rebirth and happiness throughout their lives, everywhere they go; they will be compassionate and help those in fear and pain. That's the power that God gives us and them.

So it seems to me that an essential element of what it means to be a church is to accept that we have authority to speak and act for God in the world. When God calls us, he offers us authority, the power to astound those who hear us, or those to whom we bring our ministry, even to astound ourselves. To astound people with that feeling that something wonderful and full of grace is taking place.

When we accept the authority that God gives us, we can create a church that brings the Kingdom of God to Earth. A church that lives out the phrase, "the church is the body of Christ in the world." A church that is a vital, defining community for its members. This is the idea that I am forming of what it means that we are the church, that we are Saint Martin's.

In the name of the God who invites us to be co-authors with him of all that is heavenly, earthly, and truly vital in our lives, **Amen.**