

Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year A
May 22, 2011
The Rev. Canon Anne B. Stevenson
Acts 7:55-60
Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16
1 Peter 2:2-10
John 14:1-14
Retirement Sermon

*Without regret, without looking back,
Without second thoughts
Gather every and any event in your life
and stand before it with inexhaustible awe.
Go, go forth, step by step;
From doubt toward faith
In spite of all impossibility;
And light a fire –
Yes, even with the thorns that wound.*

That poem, entitled “On the Way”, by Frere Roger, of Taize, and translated from the French, may be a theme for this farewell sermon or retirement homily. It is definitely not a Farewell Discourse of the classical form, when the departing person (whether about to die or embark on an extended journey) would give sage advice and instructions to those remaining behind. I really have neither sage advice nor important, lengthy instructions to give you. Mostly, above all, I want to say how fabulous you all are, how amazing my 22 plus years at Christ Church Cathedral have been with you who are my friends and fellow journeyers along the way.

Without regret... Go, go forth. Tom Ward, who invited me to become a part of Christ Church, asked me once if I ever made a decision by myself. You will not be surprised to hear that my answer was no; I generally call some or all of the priests joining us today, ask their advice and direction and only then, after, of course, some prayer and reflection, make a decision. I cannot begin to tell you the role each of these priests and their families have played in my spiritual and personal journey. They have taught me much of what I know about God, Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Bible, the church, liturgy, pastoral care. They have been present with me and my family in times of great joy and celebration and great pain.

Without regret, without looking back.... Well, I do have to look back. How incredibly blessed I have been to have found this vocation as a priest when I was over 40! How providential that my family would be in Belgium, where the Catholic University of Louvain was located; that I could be educated by such scholars in the richness of theology and scripture, liturgy and tradition ancient and modern; that I could be called to be a priest in such vibrant and nurturing congregations in Belgium, Mississippi and now in Nashville. I am still quite amazed that I have had the opportunity to be a priest, and be part of your lives here at Christ Church Cathedral in such powerful and intimate ways. Weddings, baptisms, confirmations; hospitals and funerals; EFM, the Catechumenate, Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, First Friday, Taize, music and dance, flowers and concerts; the liturgies of the church, year after year. You have been the face of Christ to me and for me, in sickness and in health. I have truly experienced the love of Christ in each of you personally and together in worship, standing *before each event with inexhaustible awe*. Yes, there have been times of sadness, even *with the thorns that wound*.

My greatest supporters have always been my children, Catherine, George and Sarah, and my late husband Bob. It is hard to imagine how I could have been so fortunate to find a person so smart and attractive and funny who loved me and wanted only the best for me and for our family. He was so thrilled with my

becoming a priest (he was a supporter of women's ordination long before I could even see the point!). He would have loved today; no one loved a celebration more than Bob. Actually, his spirit is here with us, and his ashes rest in the Columbarium.

Perhaps in the nature of a Farewell Discourse, I should give just a few words of instruction. I trust that you will continue to support Timothy and Gene and Dolores and whoever else comes to minister in this cathedral. Truly this is a sacred and holy space and the worship of God that has gone on will continue to go on for generations; ministry will continue to touch lives in this community, this city and the world; you will continue to be creative and innovative and take risks for the gospel. In today's gospel, part of his Farewell Discourse in John, Jesus says "I am the way, the truth and the life" and that is the way we are called to follow our Lord.

Go, go forth, step by step Frere Roger says, *from doubt toward faith in spite of all impossibility*. It is hard to imagine exactly where my next steps will take me. I heard a report that the 2 most dangerous years in a person's life are the first year of their life and the year they retire. So I am On the Way to a dangerous year. You will always be part of me. The love we share and the faith we share will not die. We are united by ties that are stronger than even death.

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