

**Rev. Mary-Lloyd Brainard, Deacon**

**May 2, 2010, 5 Easter**

**Last Sermon at St. John's**

**Acts 11:1-18**

**Psalm 148**

**Revelation 21:1-6**

**John 13:31-35**

May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. (Ps. 19:14)

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Most of you are probably unaware that when I come into this pulpit I step onto a wonderfully crafted wooden box. On the underside of this box is my name and a date, May 22, 2005 - the date of my first sermon at St. John's.

You all know that I love to tell stories, and the wonderfully crafted wooden box that I am standing on now has a story all its own.

I arrived in Essex on Sunday, May 1, 2005. I was very excited, but I was also a bit apprehensive. A new church, a new community, a new boss and a whole bunch of new faces. Jonathan spent a lot of time with me that week. He introduced me to The Black Seal, Village Provisions and The Captain's Cup. We ate hamburgers, Chinese and, of course, quisadillas at a Mexican restaurant the name of which I don't even remember! We visited parishioners at Aaron Manor and Essex Meadows and some of those same parishioners I have continued to visit during the last five years.

We spent time in this beautiful worship space and talked about the liturgy and what we were accustomed to and comfortable with. Everything was going along very smoothly until I stepped into the pulpit and immediately realized that only my eyes and the top of my head would be visible over the lectern! "I'm short, Jonathan, and I'm going to need a boost." "Not to worry," he answered, "we will get in touch with Doug Ryan, and he will come up with a good solution." My response was, "who is Doug Ryan and where do I find him?"

I found out who Doug Ryan was, and where I could find him, and after a brief conversation, he did come up with the solution - he would build a wooden box just right for me that would give me the boost that I needed. It was the beginning of an incredible relationship with a little brownstone church in the Village of Essex. You opened your hearts to me. You welcomed me into your homes and into your lives, and together we began to reach out to serve the Lord in some new and different ways.

Deacons are ordained for life to a servant ministry and assigned by the bishop to parishes throughout the diocese. Our work focuses on bringing the church and the world together by supporting and growing ministries within a parish and birthing new ones in other places beyond its walls. That was not a difficult job here at St. John's! I found busy, faith-filled people serving meals at the Soup Kitchen on Tuesday evenings, delivering Meals on Wheels, working with Habitat for Humanity, volunteering in area Hospice Programs and as tutors in the "I Have A Friend After-

School Program" in Middletown. I watched you fill back packs in the Fall for children who otherwise would not have new school supplies and purchase and wrap clothing and toys as part of the Christmas Tree Giving Program. You generously supported the work of Hospital Albert Schweitzer in Haiti as well as the Cathedral in Maciene and St. Stephen's School for Vulnerable Children in Mozambique, and an energetic Youth Group was engaged in a variety of fund raisers, the proceeds of which were used to support outreach ministries here at St. John's.

There is, however, one place where I feel the very essence of God's love shines the brightest. That place and time is the last Sunday of the month at the 9 o'clock service when at the offertory the children of the church school bring to the altar the non-perishable food items that have been donated for the Food Pantry in Old Saybrook. During the month, the items are placed in the baskets in the narthex and these young people, some not much bigger than the box of cereal or bottle of juice they carry, place their offering before God to help feed a hungry family.

The look on their faces tells me that they know they are doing something very important! Another child will have a bowl of cheerios for breakfast or a glass of apple juice at lunch because they have shared some of what they enjoy every day.

Your ministries touch so many people in so many ways, and despite all that you already did to shine the light of Christ in this community and beyond, you found time in your crowded calendars to follow me to another place.

We began to knit Prayer Shawls, and eighty people are now wrapped in the prayers that went into each one of those shawls. You have worked to strengthen and grow our Pastoral Care Team visiting and sending cards to thirty people on our Pastoral Care List. You offered your time to train as Eucharistic Visitors and bring communion to homebound parishioners following one of our main services on Sunday or Wednesday, uniting us as one in the body of Christ. And you reached out enthusiastically to embrace a ministry that I am passionate about!

I became involved with York Correctional Institution for Women in Niantic shortly before I came to St. John's My hope and my prayer was that **you** would be willing to embrace a piece of that ministry. My prayers were answered and my hopes fulfilled when I introduced you to "A Sacred Place," and you wanted to know more about the programs that functioned under the umbrella of that spiritually oriented program.

You donate new books to the Storybook Project for the children of the women incarcerated there. You help wrap Christmas gifts for more than 2,000 children of the 1,000 mothers and you donated bags and bags of new sweat pants and shirts for the women who will need them when their release is eminent. You responded to my request, but I never imagined that you would respond in such an overwhelming way! I made three trips from my upstairs office to my car and then again to the Chaplain's office in Niantic!

Some of you serve with me as a Prayer Partner in the Chrysalis and Willow Programs. Those involved in the Willow Program mentor women who are serving long-term sentences, while in Chrysalis we spend time every Wednesday evening

with an individual woman helping to prepare her for life beyond the prison walls. We listen, they listen and we share our stories. We review the week's class work with them, and we never forget to laugh about something silly that has happened since we were last together. They don't know our full names, where we live or much about what we do with our lives when we are not with them but that doesn't seem to make any difference. Our time together is a blessed time, and when we finish our prayer circle at the end of the evening and they board the vans to return to their rooms, we all know that God has certainly been present in that place where the tables and chairs are bolted to the floor. Rhode VanGessell is new this year to the Chrysalis Program and has written eloquently and from her heart about her experience as a Prayer Partner. I urge you to read her testimony in last week's E-news or in the May newsletter, and be sure to let her know if Wednesdays at York might be a place where God is asking you to serve.

And one more time you reached out to establish a new relationship with New Life Ministries, a prison outreach program at The Church of Christ the King in Old Lyme. That congregation maintains an apartment in New London for women who are being released and volunteers function as mentors assisting them in finding a job, getting a drivers license and putting together a wardrobe. St. John's will provide a large basket of personal items for each woman as she begins to establish her life away from York.

In the gospel this morning, Jesus is preparing to leave his disciples and tells them to love one another as he has loved them and "by this everyone will know that you are my disciples" (John 13:34) His love for us is huge, he walked the way to the cross for us, and now he asks us, as his disciples, to assume that responsibility and bring the message of his love to all those whose lives we touch - and you do just that! I have witnessed you take that responsibility seriously and open your hearts and your hands unselfishly to serve wherever there is a need.

It is not easy for me to leave St. John's. It is, and will always be, a very special place for me. It is a Deacon's Dream, and my decision came only after months of prayer and mornings sitting on those rocks at the beach in Stonington that you hear so much about. I waited for that nudge, that silent voice, to tell me what was next.

Esther de Waal who has written widely on the monastic life and more specifically the Benedictine tradition, calls changes in our lives "thresholds." In one of her recent books entitled "To Pause at the Threshold - Reflections on Living on the Border" she explains, and I quote, "this book comes out of a particular place that I know, but it is ultimately about making my place or any circumstance the threshold into the other, the new, the strange, and showing the image of difference, mystery, otherness at work in God's world." Unquote

She makes reference to the ancient Japanese custom of removing ones shoes before entering the house. They stand on the lintel in order to remove the shoes that have been worn outside in the street and upon entering the house they put on slippers which have been placed inside the door. "This forces a very deliberate and conscious way of standing still," de Waal says, "even if only for a moment, in order to show respect for the difference between two spaces, and the preparation for the encounter

with another person, another household"

It is a very powerful image, and you and I are standing on a threshold together right now. I have been here before and so have you. It is a place where we realize that the space behind us will never be quite the same, and the space in front of us is a bit frightening because it is new and unfamiliar. We are being asked to leave our comfort zone and try something new - you to continue to grow the ministries here at St. John's and me to move to another place. It is what we do as disciples of Christ!!

I am not sure about the meaning of the word "retirement." I like to think that I am just "turning the page." It will take a lot more rock sitting at the beach to discover how the next page reads, and I plan to do that during the summer months. I will catch up with family and friends, continue my work on the Diocesan Deacons' Council and with the women at York and in the Fall hope to feel that nudge that will take me down another road. I try, as deWaal suggests, to learn each time that I am called upon to move forward to hand over the past freely, putting it behind me and moving on with hands open and ready for the new.

Our relationships are unique, and as I look out at you this morning I want you to know that each one of you has brought a special grace into my life. Special graces come in a variety of packages and for me two of them are wrapped in a black clerical shirt and a white collar. Yes, its Molly and Jonathan! We are colleagues and friends, and it was easy for us to work as a team to bring God's love into your lives. Mitch Albom had Tuesday's with Morrie, but I had Tuesday's with Molly and Jonathan. Each week we met for a staff meeting at noon in the Parish Hall. We brought a bag lunch, prayed together, shared family news, parish news and any pastoral concerns that we had. I brought my yellow pad and pen and they brought their hand-held devices that keep them in touch with the world! I don't know how those devices work, but I do know that I will never own one! I will miss that time.

As I prepare to turn the page and take this next step, I ask for your prayers and for your love. You will certainly have mine. We have shared life and we have shared death, we have shared chaos and we have shared joy, and now we share a place on this threshold. It has all been an extraordinary blessing and the only thing left to say is - "Thank you."

**Let us Pray Together** - Good and gracious Father, we come before you this morning with thanksgiving for all the blessings that you give us and especially today for the gift of this relationship. Help us to feel your presence in our daily lives and give us strength and patience as we continue to reach out and bring your love to the world around us. Guide us in the work you have given us to do and to recognize that love happens in small ways one step at a time. Bless this place and bless each one of us as we stand on this threshold, and help us to be true disciples and look for you in all those corners that we so often ignore.

In Jesus name we pray. AMEN!