

Pentecost 6, July 5, 2015
Sermon by the Rev. Jesse W. Lebus
St. John's Church, Cold Spring Harbor

Well, that was quite a going away party you all threw for David and his family on Sunday evening...I'll tell you after that one, Meredith and I can't wait to leave!

I've reflected again and again on the events of this past Sunday evening, the celebration of David's ministry, the Eucharist and the party, the food and the fellowship... all of it in such abundance... especially the outpouring of gratitude and the sharing of talents and stories... For whatever it's worth that night left quite an impression on Meredith and me.

I've heard through the grapevine, that I've made a good first impression on many of the folks at Saint John's. I think that's good to a certain extent... you see, I consider this bit of news to be what I call "both/and" information. For me, making a good impression is both comforting and terrifying.

On the one-hand, making a good first impression is a worthy aspiration, you know, it gets things off to a good start, sets people at ease, and to do so...to hear that I've made a good impression, is certainly a relief.

However, it does stir in me a bit of anxiety...and more than once, I've found myself asking: can I live up to the impression that I have only faintly carved into this community?

So many of you have been gentle when it comes to my remembering of names, and more than once someone has said, "Jesse, don't worry, it's easy for us to remember your name there is only one of you and so many of us,"

...and there in the midst of my gratitude for the kind understanding I've been offered, I realize that the letter of agreement that I signed last month is more than a contract of terms concerning my ministry at St. John's...it's a covenant of vulnerability.

There are so many of you and only one of me and I'm afraid that it won't be long before the Tiffany window of that first impression will begin to shatter... broken apart by the stones of what's really going on, those stones of the "real picture" that are always stacked nearby, ready to humble the ideal, or rather humble those who wish to be seen as ideal.

The truth is that, eventually, you all will know more about me than just my name. It's a truth that I'm only just settling into... but that's the nature of a covenant of vulnerability.

So rather than boast about my ability to make a good first impression, I'll get the self-disclosure-ball rolling here and share with you about a thorn that is stuck in my side, one of those little things that keeps me at arm's length from being what I imagine is the ideal curate: poor scheduling.

In my defense, it doesn't just stem from absent mindedness... you see, my ongoing struggle with scheduling is as much about wanting to say yes to everything as it is about forgetting some things. Here's an example:

Even before Sunday night's soiree was half-over I had already double booked July 18th. It seems that on that Saturday I'm scheduled to play in the West Neck Tennis Invitational the same time that I'll be joining Saint John's to help other local faith communities build a house for a family of 5 in Wyandanch.

And while I'm on the subject of my own weaknesses I should confess that my second serve is under hand and that I lost the tip of my finger to a table saw ten years ago... I guess I have room to grow in a few areas.

I don't know, maybe you'd rather have me play tennis; at the very least they should have me sign a waiver at the construction site.

I believe Paul was right when he wrote to the Christians at Corinth, that despite the anxiety, there is strength in weakness.

It is not the kind of message that we hear outside church walls or read outside the Bible very often, but it is common to Christian precepts: that somehow, living into a counter cultural notion will produce the desired results. Give up everything you own to become rich, acknowledge your weakness to become strong... die to yourself that you might live forever...

That joke that I told at the beginning of this service, I have told it a few times this week... and the fact that many of you laugh is a testament to your sense of humor, but for some the comic irony spoke too soon to the pain of loss. It got plenty of laughs, sure, but those laughs were always followed by a reflective and pensive pause.

The joke is only partly funny because it reminds us – and I mean us, me included – it reminds us that David's leaving is not only sad, but also signals that a period of profound transition is on the horizon...the sort of shifts

that are occurring in my life and in the life of this community justify a feeling of vulnerability.

I suspect Jesus' disciples might have had the same feeling when he told them to take to the high roads and byways to share the message of repentance and the good news that the Kingdom was at hand. He sent them from their homes, the enclaves of family and security that rested on the shore of that life giving lake to head out into the unknown professing a faith they only half understood.

And to add to that sense of vulnerability Jesus says: "Rather than prepare for your journey by gathering things up around you, I want you to drop some things at the door as you leave."

"Take nothing for your journey except a staff," he said; "no bread, no bag, no money in your belts; wear only sandals and one shirt."

"Hey Jesse," Jesus told me, "Why don't you go to a new village, where you won't have a mentor, where the community is in flux. Take your lack of administrative skills and your fear of being really known and share with them a message that you don't completely understand."

And Jesus says, "Hey Saint John's..." I figured I'd let you all write that part of the sermon yourselves.

Eventually, I will come to know more about many of you than just your names. That is the nature of our covenant, a Covenant of Vulnerability.

But thank God, vulnerability is that liminal space where, by grace, we can mature into Christ. It is along the edge of our own vulnerability, and the vulnerability of our community, that we find the opportunity to grow in strength and spirit towards our true selves, a reflection of the divine in the world.

As the word liminal suggests, we are standing on the threshold, peering out into a world where we can either fight tooth and nail to yank those thorns from our flesh, cover and shield our vulnerabilities and weaknesses or we can surrender to grace. Realizing that more often than not, the less we carry the easier it is to travel.

At the end of this service I will stand before you and pronounce: go in peace to love and serve the Lord and together we'll journey from this temple into the temple of creation, I wonder what I will leave behind?

Loving God, everyday offers us the opportunity to step into the unknown and surrender to you newness. Help us to name and claim our weaknesses, embrace our vulnerability and receive your grace to strengthen and guide us, amen.