

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday After the Epiphany: Isaiah 58:1-12

The Rev. Brooks Cato

I want to talk a little more about painting the church this morning. We're getting quotes and finalizing plans and you all know by now that we're gonna start voting next Sunday. Remember folks, this is a church, not a congressional run-off. All three options come from some era of history in this very building, all three options your elected representatives and generous volunteers said would be just fine. All of us will come together to do this thing as a church, as the Body of Christ. So, that means there's some things that we need to keep in mind.

First off, it means that, while we're all absolutely allowed to have our preferences (encouraged to have preferences, even), we're a community of love trying to make a decision that's more complicated than it seems. Hold onto that love.

Second, we're not gonna fall into camps. You can like green more than brown or decide white is just plain lovely, that's great! But also, remember that there are other folks with other preferences. That doesn't make them stupid or mean or unwise. It just means that they like something different, or see something differently with their God-given different-seeing eyes.

Third, this is a really important decision. It is. The color of the church will be, for some people, the only thing they ever see of St. Thomas'. Maybe the act of painting the building will let people know we're here and we're alive and we're planning on being around for a long time.

Fourth, it's not *just* paint. It's more than that in a real way. When you remember fond days here, or less than fond days here, the building and what it looked like then are part of those memories, which means the color itself is tied up in pleasant memories of the happiest days of your life and in the most tragic moments. That's a real thing.

But fifth, in some ways it is *just* paint. Paint does two things. It protects the wood underneath and it helps us give folks directions. Beyond that, it's all aesthetics which matters but also doesn't. Salt is still salty whether it's white or clear or pink Himalayan.

And finally, sixth, the paint is not going to save St. Thomas'. How we treat each other and conduct this process over the next couple of weeks absolutely matters one million percent more than however the votes turn out.

Actually, it's a funny thing being stewards of a place of worship. We sit in a long line of millenia of treasured worship spaces, and we do all we can to care for and ensure the continued existence of our 177 year old building. We are the Body of Christ, and this is our home. But I want to remind y'all of a moment in the Christian story that kinda makes my building-preserving heart a little itchy: when Jesus and his Disciples left the Temple in Jerusalem, those country bumpkins couldn't help but ooh and ahh at the beauty of that house of worship in the big city. And Jesus rains on their parade with a really important theological nugget. He says that even those stones will one day fall, and not a single one will remain standing on another. It's such a downer and such a terrible thought that it ends up being one of the reasons he's put on trial. But it's important. We're here for God, not for the things of this world that we care so deeply for. Yes, it is crucial -- pun intended -- for us to maintain our places set aside for God while remembering that this place is not God. It is holy. It is sacred. It is well-beloved and deserving of our careful attention and resources. But it is also crucial, I suspect more crucial, to remember the sacredness of the person in front of us more than we ever remember the sacredness of the building itself.

Now, I'll tell you this: I've heard a lot of folks getting excited about the paint, and that's fantastic! I'm not gonna rain on that parade, but I do want to put out a caveat. It is a good and joyful thing for us to get excited about this. Maybe folks will see our new paint and think it's neat and maybe they'll come inside to look around

and maybe they'll see our bulletin boards next door and maybe they'll see how involved we are with the community and outreach and general loving of neighbors and then maybe they'll start sitting in the pews and then maybe they'll join the altar guild and then maybe they'll serve on vestry and maybe, maybe even pledge. Maybe they will. But that's not why we're painting the building. We're painting the building 'cause the paint's chipping and the wood underneath's starting to rot. And we're picking the color this way for the sake of transparency, more than paint-picking has had in the past. Painting the building, though, realistically, it might generate some interest, but it's not going to transform St. Thomas' into a beacon of hope. Truth is, St. Thomas' already is a beacon of hope more than most of us know.

There's a woman who occasionally has a place to stay, occasionally doesn't. Some of y'all have met her. She always has a story to tell, and I'm never quite sure how much of it is true, but I do know that she only comes here when she really, really needs it. And when she does really, really need it, we usually find her sleeping in a pew or on a couch next door. She knows when the nights are bitter and her belly's empty, she knows she can find some light and some rest and something to eat here.

There's a man who comes in from time to time who has a traumatic brain injury. He makes it ok most days, most months, really, but sometimes life is too much. And when he doesn't know what else to do, he comes here. And he sits and drinks a cup of coffee and talks about his woes, of which there are many, and then he goes on his way, unburdened enough to stay in this world for another couple of months.

There's a nonbinary student that doesn't care anything about Christianity but who I've found sitting in these pews of an evening. That prayer light we've switched on was just the light they needed to know this is a quiet and safe place to hide from the horrors of the world outside those doors. They weren't certain they'd find peace here, but they suspected there might be a chance, and now they know it to be true. And when they turned around to reenter the world with more bravery than I can fathom, they saw a rainbow on that banner hidden in its glorious colors and felt not just peace but safety and warmth and light.

Sometimes it seems like even the weather wants to get in here, maybe the air itself is seeking a calm break from the whirlwind whipping it around. I'm sure some of us can relate to that feeling.

Folks, what I'm getting at is that the flavor that makes us salt or the light that shines from within is all about how we love each other and serve in this place. The color of the church isn't going to feed more people, brown isn't going to do a better job of paying someone's heating bill, white isn't going to stand up for the oppressed more often, green isn't going to hold space for tears and laughter and grace and joy more effectively. What we are and what we are called to be is the Body of Christ, a Body which makes itself known by its fruits. Whatever color we choose, we choose. Great. But what matters deeply is the love that continues on in this place. Y'all know how you can feel it when a place is filled with love? Keep that up. Put that loving lamp up high. I want to close this morning with good ol' Isaiah. He shines light on what we're about better than I ever could.

“Is not this the fast that I choose:” he says,

“to loose the bonds of injustice,

to undo the thongs of the yoke,

to let the oppressed go free,

and to break every yoke?”

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,

and bring the homeless poor into your house;

when you see the naked, to cover them?”

No matter what color we pick, at St. Thomas' they “shall cry for help, and God will say, Here I am.”