



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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Greatness

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, September 19, 2021

The Feast of Saint Bartholomew

Deuteronomy 18:15-181, Psalm 91, 1 Corinthians 4:9-15, Luke 22:24-30

Come, Holy Spirit, and kindle the fire that is in us.

Take our lips and speak through them.

Take our hearts and see through them.

Take our souls and set them on fire. Amen

I met some folks the other day, and, when they asked me what I did for a living, I said, "I'm the Rector of St. Bart's Church." And then to help them out a little, I said, "It's the one on Park Avenue, next to the Waldorf." Their eyes lit up, and one of them said, "Ohhh, that's a great church." I smiled and said, "Thank you. We try to be."

But I knew what he meant. First, I think he was implying that I'd landed pretty well, vocationally speaking. (And it is, truly, an honor to serve this storied congregation.) He knew St. Bart's was located in a magnificent building with a long history in the City of New York. It's known around the Episcopal Church for its ministry, its music, its preaching, its educational programs, its radical welcome, and for its outreach.

It's also a church that's been at the forefront of a series of controversial issues. Percy Preston reminded me of that fact recently when he sent me a copy of Dr. Leighton Parks' 1923 sermon defending a variety of interpretations of the doctrine of the Virgin Birth. This former Rector of St. Bartholomew's was not afraid to take risks on behalf of his theological convictions, and it became front page news "above the fold" for *The New York Times* in those days.

Rector Tom Bowers was at the forefront of the movement to ordain women. He put homeless people in the front lobby of the church so they would have safe place to spend the night. Rector Bill Tully put "radical welcome" into the DNA of this church and welcomed LGBTQ+ people fully into the church. At St. Bart's we've been strong advocates for racial equality, economic justice, and a host of other issues which haven't always found supportive voices within traditional Christianity.

But what actually makes a church "great"?

- Is it the architecture, the transcendent beauty of the building?
- Is it an amazing music program or a spellbinding preaching staff or an unparalleled Christian education effort?
- Is it the size of the congregation? Is it the number of people attending who testify to a church's greatness?
- Or is it the number of people in need who are fed or housed or clothed or cared for?

I believe all great churches, like their counterparts in great temples or great mosques, stand for something. They bear witness to God's presence and purpose in the world. Great churches have a voice

that afflicts the comfortable and comforts the afflicted. Churches do not decide to become great. They decide to do great things. They give witness to the holy, the ineffable presence of God in the right here and now, even in the midst of a world that seems pretty skeptical about *any* religious institution.

But religious institutions are established so that each and every generation won't need to reinvent the wheel and build over and over again what is deemed crucial to human civilization by those of us of religious faith. Previous generations had the audacity to build this great edifice, and it is our responsibility to preserve it and to make good use of it. If churches are any good at all, they will stand for something that will bear a resemblance to the very values and teachings of Christ.

There was a fight that broke out among the disciples of Jesus as to which one of them was going to be regarded as the greatest. (Nothing like a good old-fashioned church fight to get the blood pumping with all that passive-aggressive energy flowing.)

- Who's going to be the leader?
- Who's going to be listened to?
- Who's going to be seen as the most important?

But Jesus said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves." Like one who serves. Jesus wasn't having any of this "You're not the boss of me" nonsense. You truly want to be the greatest? Then you've got to be the one who gives the most, helps the most, cares the most, risks the most, and sacrifices the most.

The Gospel of Luke, where this lesson is found, is the gospel which, I think, most emphasizes the humanity and the compassion of Christ. This is the gospel (and the only gospel) where the story of the prodigal son is found. The author of Luke preserves some of the most beloved of the parables of Jesus: the Good Samaritan, the Unjust Judge, the Pharisee, and the Tax Collector.

This is also the gospel where the tenderness and mercy of Christ is emphasized, particularly to those in need. In Luke, members of despised races are commended. Here Samaritans can do good, Gentiles will have an opportunity to accept the gospel, and women have a new place of importance among the followers of Christ. It's as if the entire Gospel of Luke is written in the context of servanthood.

Now truly great churches don't think of themselves as great. They can't. Great churches are always aware of what isn't being done, of what they could be doing better, or what they're not doing at all. There's an urgency in great churches to be of more help. They're constantly thinking in terms of what kind of service they can offer to others in Christ's name. The leadership of this church is currently engaged in a strategic planning process to better determine how we can be more effective in our service. We hear the clock ticking, and we know we don't have forever to achieve our goals.

Today, we celebrate The Feast of St. Bartholomew, our patron saint. It's a moveable feast that we've transferred from its traditional August 24th date in order to celebrate this feast as the beginning of a new programmatic year. And what a new year this is turning out to be! So many of us thought that by Labor Day, at long last, we would be back to a new normal and the pandemic would have largely run its course. Such wishful, fantastical thinking. (I believed it, too.) What we now know is that we will need to be yet more resilient, more persevering, still stronger, even more durable for a longer time in order to make it through.

So, who was this St. Bartholomew we celebrate today? He's listed as one of the twelve apostles in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but we know little about him compared to the other apostles. He's listed as one of the witnesses to the Ascension. He's been identified as "Nathaniel," who appears in the Gospel

According to John when he's introduced to Jesus by the apostle Philip; but not all scholars agree there's a connection. It's said that he was martyred for having converted Polymius, King of Armenia, to Christianity, but we can't be completely certain of that either. Legend suggests he was martyred by being flayed alive and then beheaded, which is why the symbol for St. Bartholomew is three flaying knives and why, as I think I've mentioned before, no one on the planet earth would ever select this saint to be a part of a marketing campaign for the Christian faith.

But the fact that very little can be known for certain about St. Bartholomew also serves to make him more attractive. It makes him so much more like us than we may have originally thought. Because, truth be told, we're constantly being surprised by ourselves. This pandemic has revealed things about us that we wouldn't have previously guessed. Many of us are discovering new things that we didn't really know about ourselves.

- We didn't know we had such deep fears.
- We didn't know we could commandeer such persevering strengths.
- We didn't know we had such lofty dreams for our lives. Who knew? Certainly not those of us who were, before the pandemic, busy checking off the little boxes in our predictable, quotidian lives.

Old St. Bart may just be the perfect saint for us in this moment. He represents, as much as any apostle, a low key, non-egocentric approach to leadership.

Scottish Theologian William Barclay observed, "One of the most poignantly tragic things in (this) gospel story is that the disciples could quarrel about precedence in the very shadow of the cross. The seating arrangement at a Jewish feast was very definite. The table was arranged like a square with one side left open. At the top of the square, in the center, sat the host. On his right, sat the guest of first honor, on his left, the second guest, second on his right, the third guest, second on his left, the fourth guest and so on around the table."ⁱ So the disciples, hours away from the crucifixion of Jesus, are arguing where they're going to sit as if their identity is at stake, as if their salvation is at stake. After all this time with the Master, after all the teaching they'd heard from him, and still, still, "they had not rid themselves of the idea of an earthly kingdom."ⁱⁱ

If we are going to be a truly great church, it will depend upon all of us becoming servants in the most profound way. We will need to give sacrificially of our time, our tithe, and our talents. We will need to be humble and pitch in to do all the things that need to be done around a big church. We won't be able to "staff it all out." Someone needs to stuff the stewardship mailings, and someone needs to help carry the processional cross, and someone needs to welcome newcomers warmly, and someone needs to call on those who are ill, and someone needs to volunteer at the bookstore, and someone needs to make breakfast for the hungry. There are literally hundreds of ministries at St. Bart's that are waiting for you to volunteer and say, "I'll help." "I'd like to do that." "I might be good at that."

Is St. Bart's a truly great church? That's not for me to say. What I can say is that St. Bart's has a great building in a great location. I can say St. Bart's has great members, great lay leaders, and a great tradition of service to others. I can say that St. Bart's has greatness in it. Whether or not we can be a truly great church rests finally, I believe, on the commitment of each one of us.

The Apostle Paul, writing to his beloved, aggravating, vulnerable church members in Corinth, wrote, "We are fools for the sake of Christ, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. To the present hour we are hungry and thirsty, we are poorly clothed and beaten and homeless, and we grow weary from the work of our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we speak kindly. We have become like the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things, to this very day."

These were the sacrifices of members of the Early Church, who thought more about faithfulness than greatness and more about survival than triumph. This is the identity to which we are called in this swiftly changing time, the heritage with which we have been so richly blessed.

“Fools for Christ.” Not a bad calling. Not a bad calling at all.

Amen.

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ⁱ William Barclay’s *Daily Study Bible*, “Strife Among The Disciples Of Christ,” (Luke 22:24-30).

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*