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New Minister Marks New Beginning for St. Philip's in Wiscasset

By Abigail W. Adams

St. Philip's Episcopal Church in Wiscasset celebrated a new beginning Sunday, Feb. 1 in a special service that recognized the Rev. Paul Tunkle as the new priest in charge. The ceremony, presided over by the Right Rev. Stephen Lane, bishop of Maine, marked the start of a new ministry for St. Philip's, a congregation that has existed in Wiscasset since the mid-1800s.

Tunkle, of Dresden, emerged from retirement to share his 30 years of ministerial experience with St. Philip's in his new role as priest in charge. In those 30 years, there have been "some wonderful mountaintops and some dreadful valleys of the shadow of death," Tunkle said.

He draws from the full range of those experiences to offer the new congregation a multifaceted approach to the Gospel, a commitment to social justice, and strong empathy to those in spiritual or emotional crisis.

Tunkle was raised in the Bronx in a secular Jewish family active in the labor movement and with social justice causes, he said. While culturally and ethnically connected to their Russian Jewish ancestry, Tunkle's family was adamantly atheist - a position Tunkle described as "a spiritual casualty of the holocaust."

Tunkle embarked on his own spiritual journey in adulthood, which ultimately led him to a career in the Episcopal ministry. Tunkle experimented with a variety of spiritual and religious practices while living in Colorado in his 20s. He met his wife Judy in Boulder. On a cross-country trip, the young couple ran out of gas in Rockland and decided to make Midcoast Maine their home.

They started to attend the Episcopal church in Rockland to meet people - it was the religion Judy was raised in. Tunkle was drawn in, but questioned for a solid year converting to Christianity. Tunkle said he made his decision on a dark and stormy night at the Owls Head lighthouse.

Tunkle said he went to the Owls Head lighthouse that night to say his first prayer. He was asking for clarity regarding the questions of faith that plagued him. In a flash of light, he saw a vision of Jesus with his arms outstretched.

Tunkle tried to convince himself the vision was nothing, but immediately upon returning home his wife asked him what had happened to him. She told him he looked different. "I was sunk at that moment," Tunkle said. "I was in hook, line, and sinker."

Despite the strong opposition of his mother, Tunkle converted to Christianity in 1974. He decided to pursue a career in the ministry due in part to conversations he had with his godmother, Betty Economy, as she was dying of cancer. The two would speak in-depth about religion, life and death, and God. "Never did I feel so alive as when I was talking to her about these subjects," Tunkle said.

Tunkle was sponsored for ordination by the Diocese of Maine and became an Episcopal minister in the mid-1980s. He has worked as a rector in churches in New Jersey, Louisiana, and Maryland. The influence of Judaism and the social activism of his family were never far from Tunkle's work as a priest.



Rev. Paul Tunkle at St. Philip's Episcopal Church in Wiscasset on Jan. 29. Tunkle was officially installed as priest in charge of St. Philip's on Sunday, Feb. 1. (Abigail Adams photo)

From the pulpit, Tunkle addressed a number of controversial topics, such as the death penalty and civil rights. "I've never been able to read Scripture without moving in the direction of becoming a social activist," Tunkle said. "The Jesus I encounter in the Gospels is a social reformer who speaks truth to power."

Tunkle delivered an unapologetic sermon in 2004 that lambasted President George W. Bush for his decision to go to war in Iraq. His remarks landed on the front page of The Baltimore Sun. "I consider it the responsibility of religious leaders to call out politicians when they do wrong," Tunkle said.

Tunkle's Jewish heritage helped shape his approach to interpreting the Bible and led him to emphasize the importance of interfaith dialogue. "There is more than one meaning to the Scriptures," Tunkle said, highlighting a passage in Isaiah where the birth of Jesus is prophesied. "They mean different things to different people."

Tunkle has also been active in building bridges between the Jewish, Muslim, and Christian communities. Tunkle was invited to participate on a special tour of the Middle East post-9/11 to meet the Grand Muftis of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria. Tunkle called the tour, which was organized to introduce religious leaders from the West to moderate Islam, eye-opening. "We live in a world of multiple truths," Tunkle said.

Tunkle said the single most defining experience of his life was the tragic death of his daughter, Lea, in 1997 - she took her own life. Tunkle said he began to question if there was a god. "Her death sent me into a spiritual nosedive," Tunkle said. "I prayed for her every day and she died."

In his crisis of faith, Tunkle came to a new understanding of the Scriptures, which ultimately strengthened his belief, he said. The resurrection of Jesus was no longer abstract, Tunkle said. It was a reflection of his struggle to find the daughter that he lost.

"There's a passage where Mary Magdalene is asked, 'Why are you searching for the living among the dead?'" Tunkle said. "It became clear to me, I was trying to find Lea among the dead, but she's not there."

Tunkle's wounds and time of vulnerability became a source of strength. He has used his experience to help others in emotional and spiritual crisis. For Tunkle, there is no stigma or shame to mental illness - he speaks about it openly with his congregations. "Anything I can do to help someone else brings some redemption," he said.

Tunkle retired from full-time ministry in 2014 and returned to Maine with Judy. They bought land in Dresden and planned to enjoy their retirement by trying their hand at subsistence farming. St. Philip's called Tunkle back to the ministry. Tunkle was attending St. Philip's as a congregant and offered to help the congregation however he could.

St. Philip's had been without a steady priest for years - they asked Tunkle if he would fill the role, which he has since November.

Tunkle and St. Philip's share a natural inclination to meet the needs of the community. Despite the small size of the congregation and deficit in the budget, St. Philip's does a variety of community service work. It operates a bargain basement to give deep discounts on clothing, operates a food pantry, and coordinates the Feed Our Scholars program.

"They're more concerned with using their resources to help others than to fix the roof," Tunkle said. "It's impressive to me."

Tunkle described the Feb. 1 service where he was officially recognized as priest in charge as "a new chemical combination of priest and parish" that marks a new beginning for St. Philip's. He hopes to see the congregation further develop in its role as a good citizen and grow.