

Epiphany 5, Year B
The Very Reverend D. S. Mote, PhD
February 4, 2024
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL
Isaiah 40:21-31
Psalm 147:1-12, 21c
1 Corinthians 9:16-23
Mark 1:29-39

The Whole (Island) City

The whole city was gathered around the door. The whole city. Everybody was there. Everybody who was sick. Everybody who had a demon. Everybody who needed a cure. Everybody who brought somebody else who needed help or just wanted to see. The whole city was gathered around the door.

Around the door of a house. A house in Capernaum. A house where a woman had just been cured of a fever. Taken by the hand and lifted up out of her sickbed; her fever vanished. Good and cured, she started serving supper. To the man who had cured her, this Jesus of Nazareth, this man baptized not quite two months before by his cousin John the Baptizer in the River Jordan, this man who just came off a fast of forty days in the wilderness being tempted by the devil, this man who just walked right along the shore of the Sea of Galilee and called out to this woman's son-in-law and his brother and this other pair of brothers who also fished for a living, "Hey, y'all, come follow me, and I'll make you fish for people." And they left their boats and their nets and their dad and followed him. Just like that.

She thought they were all crazy. But then she fell ill and spiked a fever. And he came right into her house, right straight from the synagogue in her town of Capernaum where he had been preaching with authority and stirring things up and scaring people and casting out demons there in the synagogue. He walked right in and took her by the hand and lifted her up, and her fever left her. And she started serving supper.

And now the sun was setting. And the whole city was gathered around the door. Around the door of her house. The whole city. She would never have believed it. But it had happened. It was happening. She was living it.

The whole city was gathered around the door.

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Nearly the whole island city gathers round these doors and comes inside this place and goes into the memorial garden to have a rest or a lunch. Or into the parish hall

for a meeting desperately needed or to enjoy a nosh after a service. The whole city comes around here, different days, different times. Current count is that about 25,000 of us live here year round, fewer than the 2020 census. Key West is declining in population, commensurate with the increasing cost of living here. About 25,000 of us year round, and some 5 million people visit Key West and the rest of the Keys each year.

This campus, at the corner of Duval and Eaton Streets is, for sure, in the heart of the old city of Key West. And our aim is that St Paul's—our street cred, our reputation, what is said of us as Jesus followers who are part of this congregation—our aim is that St Paul's will be increasingly in the hearts of Key West, of residents and visitors alike.

Because the whole city gathers around these doors and on this campus.

And the people who gather, I don't have to tell you, are all manner of folks. They are the working poor. They are the most affluent of all. They are everyone in between. Well off, hard up, down at the heels, down on their luck, up for adventure, out of their minds with grief. They are everyone, every race, nearly every ethnicity and many nationalities, speakers of almost every modern language on our planet.

Many of them are sick or somehow in some sort of distress, even if it's not immediately apparent by looking at them. Many of them are celebrating milestones: big birthdays that end in zeroes, engagements, weddings, anniversaries, successful cancer treatments. Many of them are carrying burdens so heavy they can barely walk. As Mother Teresa said, "Everyone you meet is fighting [some kind of] a battle. Therefore, be kind."

The whole city gathers at these doors. And we represent not only St Paul's and the Diocese of Southeast Florida, and the Episcopal Church. We also represent the Head of the Church, even Jesus Christ our Savior, that peripatetic rabbi from Galilee, that preacher, teacher, and healer, who was and is divine Love incarnate.

The world is moving around on this rock and the Lower Keys and all the Keys, and one way or another, we are moving with them. Increasingly, we are going out to meet them. It's become a bit of a catch phrase for us: "We'll meet you where you are." If you can't come to the altar to receive the sacrament, we'll bring it to you. We'll meet you where you are. At the laundromat. In the streets during parades. Delivering donations to food pantries. Taking communion out to those who can't come here.

And increasingly, we are being found by folks. Hundreds of them every day. They light candles. They offer prayers. They drink in the beauty of these stained-glass windows. They appreciate the relative peace and quiet. They love the concerts. They need the meetings. They love the Tibetan Buddhist monks.

We cannot be all things to all people, regardless of what Paul our patron says in the reading from 1 Corinthians today. But we can and do have an impact. It takes various forms. We give directions. We recommend restaurants. We offer human connections. We offer hope. We congratulate and celebrate with people. We signal a touchstone of faith. We offer and model interreligious welcome, hospitality, and respect.

And regarding that last, I want to tell you that I received two letters this past week from two members of the Key West Tara Mandala Sangha, the group that co-sponsored and did all the organizing work for the recent visit of the Tibetan monks. One letter was from the leader of the sangha. The other was from a member. They both sent donations to St Paul's. And, summarizing both letters, the message was this: *We so appreciated how St Paul's people welcomed everyone into that beautiful space for that important and profound inter-religious activity.*

Not every church would be comfortable having Tibetan monks join in worship with them, much less having them create a mandala of colored sand right in front of the chancel. But we're good with that. Because this is a place of prayer and practice for all God's people. We do what we do without apology. We invite others to come to share this space because it's not our clubhouse, it's a community asset. This whole campus is a community asset or a collection of assets. And it falls to us to find our partners in ministry not only within the congregation but also around the community who are going to help us, help us continue to steward these important assets; help us restore them, help us keep them as assets for generations to come.

Our purpose is to be an active, positive, visible Episcopal presence here at the end of the road, to offer, as my former boss Bishop Rob Wright of Atlanta says, "a winsome Anglican witness."

We have many Christians at a disadvantage because we don't need for people to agree with us in order to serve them, in order to care for them, in order to love them.

The whole city that gathers at these doors and inside this space and on this campus is not quite whole. It's not quite whole, this city, which is highly mobile. So, it matters how the people who claim to follow Jesus conduct ourselves. It matters how we talk and how we interact with other people. It matters that we know that this Jesus of

Nazareth did not come just for the sake of certain white people in this country but came for the sake of the whole world to bring compassion, love, and justice for all God's people in every place. We know that. We know that. It's our business to tell that and to live that. The whole city that gathers is not quite whole. It's filled with human beings who are both made in God's image and also wounded, just as we are, by the changes and chances of this life.

And not all of them know, not all of them have heard, as Isaiah says, not all of them have been told from the beginning, not all of them have understood from the foundations of the earth that it is God who sits above the circle of the spinning blue earth, who stretches out the heavens like a curtain and spreads them like a tent to live in. And not all of them will know, at least not in the way we know. And many of them do know but have forgotten and need to be reminded.

Will the whole city ever be a whole city? Will all those people who pass through here, including us, ever be complete and have all their needs met? Maybe. Maybe not. And that is above our pay grade. That is God's work, not ours. Our work, my work, your work is to be present, to be attentive, to be of service, to bear witness, to be ready to give account of the hope that is within us.

We can't do it all. So, let's seek to do what is ours on any given day. Most of you that for almost eight years I was Episcopal chaplain at Atlanta airport. I learned to start my days there with a particular prayer, and I want to share it with you. I still pray it most days.

It's a prayer attributed to Father Mychal Judge. Do you know that name? Father Mychal Judge was a Roman Catholic priest and a chaplain to the Fire Department of New York. He was the first first-responder casualty on 9/11. This is his prayer. It goes like this.

*Guide me where you want me to go.
Show me who you want me to know.
Give me what you want me to say.
Help me to stay out of your way.*

That's a pretty good prayer. I commend it to you for your daily prayers.

We seek, you seek, I seek each day to discern the work that is ours. And even that work is too much if we try to do it on our own. So, let's don't.

Let's remember to spend time with God and to follow the example of Jesus, our model in all things, who, today's gospel told us, after all that work—after all that teaching and healing and casting out demons in the synagogue, after healing Peter's mother-in-law and raising her up from her bed, after curing the whole city who gathered around at sundown—somewhere in there got a nap. And then very early in the morning while it was still dark, he went out by himself. To pray. To recharge. To be restored and rejuvenated.

Do you have a place like that where you can go and be relatively undisturbed? I say relatively because what happened? He got up; he went out; he said his prayers; he communed with his Father our Creator. And then what happened? *Jesus! Everyone is looking for you.* And his response should be what our response follows. Not to yell and scream. But to say, *OK, I'm ready now. Let's go on to the next place because that's what we came to do.*

Start your day from a place of fulness and rest, of grace and gratitude. Fill up and remember what you may have forgotten in the changes and chances of this life—that God loves you. You are made in God's image. You are beloved of God. And God counts on you to be a bearer of God's image and God's grace in this world that God loves so much.

We can't make it on our own. We need God's help, and we need the help of one another in community. We need places and practices that recenter and reconnect and reground us. Thank God we have some. And thank God we have this particular one here which we will come to in just a few minutes. We have that place of connection, of communion, where we remember who and whose we are, a place to fill up with grace in order to be of service.

The whole city gathers around these doors and in this space and on this campus, so we'll gather one more time, once again, at this table to which Jesus has invited everyone to be reminded of God's great love, to be empowered again to do God's work that is our work, and then to go out and serve the whole city, the whole world as it comes to us, the world that God made, that God is redeeming, that God, still and yet, so loves.