

The Feast of St. James the Fisherman - 60th Anniversary Celebration
Sunday, July 23, 2017
The Chapel of St. James the Fisherman, Wellfleet, MA
The Very Rev. Tracey Lind

Genesis 28:10-19a, Psalm 122, Romans 12:9-13, Matthew 4:18-22

On a warm summer day in July of 1957 – some 400 people gathered on this hillside to worship for the first time in the Chapel of St. James the Fisherman. And here we are, sixty years later.

The Chapel's ministry actually began in 1949 when a group of Episcopalians worshipped at the Main Street home of Mr. and Mrs. Elbert L. Blakeslee. For the following six years, during July and August, Sunday services were conducted at the Congregational Church of Wellfleet. In 1951, the Chapel became a congregation of the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts.

In 1953, the Chapel's charismatic and determined spiritual leader Jim Pike, then Dean of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City, presented the idea of constructing a building for summer worship. The idea was enthusiastically endorsed. Mr. and Mrs. Carey Melville and their daughter Maud Melville Arnold generously offered to donate two acres of their land on Rt. 6, and a successful capital campaign was conducted to raise the funds necessary for the building. Many of the names that we will recite in this morning's necrology are those of the Chapel's generous benefactors.

The famed architect and furniture designer Olav Hammarstrom, a leader of what has come to be known as the Cape Modern Movement, volunteered his services; his artist wife Marianne Saarinen donated her time as the color and textile designer; and their friend Paul Wedlinger contributed his engineering expertise.

The building was constructed to reflect the spirit of Wellfleet in both materials and design, and to express the centrality of the Eucharist and the priesthood of all believers – seating clergy and laity together around a common table. The architectural design, with a shingled steeple above the altar, interior studs and beams reminiscent of old fishing vessels, worship in the round, and a shell forming the baptismal font, initially was controversial but has proved to be formative in the Chapel's identity.

Over the past sixty years, St. James has been served by a talented and dedicated collection of clergy who have shaped our congregational worship. This college of presbyters has included three illustrious bishops, several distinguished priests, and a long list of active and retired clergy who summer on the Cape or visit as guest preachers. But most importantly, the Chapel of St. James the Fisherman has been led by a group of steadfast and capable lay people— both living and departed – far too numerous to mention by name.

Many churches are named in honor of a saint. This Chapel is dedicated to St. James the Greater, one of the twelve apostles. More affectionately known as St. James the Fisherman, this disciple was the brother of John the evangelist – one of the two sons of thunder. He is considered the first martyr of the Christian faith, beheaded in Rome. Because of his missionary efforts in Spain, James is the much loved patron saint of that country, as well as Chile and Nicaragua. James the Fisherman, whose symbol is a scallop shell, is also the patron saint of Wellfleet and is considered the protector and guardian of the fishing industry, anglers, laborers, pilgrims, and those who sufferer with arthritis.

For six decades, St. James has been a place of gracious hospitality. Each summer, the Chapel's open doors and open table welcome both newcomers and those whose families have been worshipping at here for generations, year-round and seasonal residents, vacationers and day trippers, seekers and searchers, Episcopalians and those of other faith traditions.

Since its inception, St. James the Fisherman has been a congregation committed to liturgical reform, engaged preaching, and beautiful music. Living lightly on this hillside, the Chapel has been resolute in its commitment to environmentalism. It is also famous for its outdoor coffee hour treats of oysters and Oreos.

Over the years, the Chapel's clergy and laity have provided pastoral care for many people – members and strangers alike – who have found themselves in need in comfort, counsel and compassion. Thus, this little summer church has become an important place for families to gather for those rites of passage that bind us from one generation to the next. It has also has been a meaningful place of friendship, for making new friends and reconnecting with old ones every year.

Lest we think that the Chapel has just been a quaint escape from the cares and occupations of the world: that is not so. For most of its years, this congregation has been intentional about supporting programs and services to benefit the lives of year-round residents and seasonal workers on the Cape. Currently, over half of our annual income – pledges, contributions and weekly offerings – is given away. If every congregation in the Episcopal Church were to do the same, our denomination's presence and impact in the world would be considerable.

For more than a half century, worshippers at the Chapel have been challenged by sermons that dive deep into scripture, engage the issues of the day, and often confront the powers and principalities that seek to diminish God's reign on earth. I truly believe that this is a place where preachers are encouraged to "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable" as we proclaim the good news of the Gospel.

For the last sixty years, we've gathered in this chapel to worship the God who has called each of us by name. As the apostle Paul reminds us in this morning's epistle, this same God called us together in community to "let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good."

Like James and his fishing buddies, we have been called to “be ardent in spirit, rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, and persevere in prayer.” Like those who have gone before us, we have been called to worship God in the beauty of holiness, contribute to the needs of our neighbors, and extend hospitality to strangers.

Like so many who have come before me, I now stand in what Anson Phelps Stokes, Bishop of Massachusetts once called “the most fearsome of pulpits,”¹ realizing that every word I speak crosses the Table of God before it reaches the congregation.

Reflecting on this legacy, I am reminded of a sermon that Morgan Porteus preached back in 2013. “In its simple beauty, this place is what Holy is to me... A simple building, a simple table. A group of friends and strangers looking at each other across that same table...Being made one around this table when the Lord comes as he promised, to give himself to each of us and all of us.”²

As we celebrate this significant anniversary, I would be negligent if I didn’t acknowledge the challenge facing this summer chapel (and others like it). A lot has happened in our country since a small group of Episcopalians started worshipping together in a Wellfleet living room: six generations, five wars, two recessions, a revolution in technology and communication, an emerging economy, a threatened environment, shifting patterns of work, time-off and vacation, new understandings of family, the decline of organized religion, the emergence of alternative expressions of faith, the creation of virtual faith communities, and the growth of the “spiritual but not religious” population.

We are living in volatile and uncertain times. I believe that The Chapel of St. James the Fisherman is needed more than ever before. People are hungry for spiritual meaning in their lives and desperate for places of hope and healing, refreshment and renewal, even on vacation. I also believe that we are equipped to meet this challenge with vision, faith and agility. However, we have to give some intentional thought and deliberate action to shape our future. If we don’t, we will have a beautiful chapel with no people to enter its doors.

Like James and his fellow disciples, Christ is calling us to leave our fishing nets, paddle boards, sailboats, gardens, and decks behind (once in a while) and be fishers of people who might just be looking for what the Chapel has to offer. It’s not that hard that do. If you enjoyed a restaurant, a book or a movie, a fitness club or an exercise class, a band or a beach, you probably wouldn’t be shy or embarrassed to tell your friends and neighbors about it or even invite them to go with you. Why not think of the Chapel in this same fashion and tell people about it?

As a faith community, we also might have to spend some time learning about what this generation of fulltime, seasonal and vacationing Cape Coders are looking for to enrich their spiritual lives. We might have to expend some of our Chapel resources on meeting those needs and communicating our presence. We might have to actually invite people to visit our church. And, when they show up, we will have extend that genuine and generous welcome we each received the first time we walked through these doors.

Like Jacob, we can recognize that this simple building with a simple table on a beautiful hillside on a spit of land sticking out into the sea is holy ground. And like Jacob, we can declare, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God...the gate of heaven” (Genesis 28.17). And, like James the Fisherman, James Pike, and our forbearers who established this chapel, we can spread the good news of God’s justice, love and mercy with fervent and generous hearts. Let it be so.

¹ Anson Phelps Stokes, Bishop of Massachusetts. Words spoken in the sermon preached at the dedication of the Chapel on September 1, 1957

² Morgan Porteus, Bishop of Connecticut, Retired. Sermon preached at the Chapel on August 4, 2013.