

SERMON- Proper 16 (A)

Charles R. Cowherd

Exodus 1:8-2:10

Psalms 124

Romans 12:1-8

St. Timothy's (Herndon)

August 27, 2023

Matthew 16:13-20

OPENING:

In modern slang, there is an acronym with the letters: "D... T... R"

And it stands for "Define the Relationship" → "DTR"

And it's the moment for a romantic couple when one or both of the parties want to hone in on their relationship status.

Questions are asked during this moment like: "Are we 'serious'?" "Are we 'going steady'?" "Are we 'exclusive'?" "Are we 'Facebook official'?"

All these questions help to "DTR" and relationships then rise and fall based on how they are answered.

GOSPEL:

In our Gospel story, Jesus and the disciples have their own version of a "DTR" where finally, at long last, Peter comes through.

The disciples gave the wrong answers: "John the Baptist"... "Elijah"... "Jeremiah."

But Peter summons all of his courage and fortitude, all his emotional intelligence, and his limited spiritual wisdom and he nails it:

"You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God."

DTR, successful!

Jesus completes it by saying: "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah!... you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church..."

The greatest 'DTR' in history.

Jesus and Peter see each other completely and fully, it's not romantic, but it's love and it's truth and it's beauty and it's peace.

"Welcome Home Peter"- Jesus might well have said to close things up.

and so I say to you "Welcome Home St. Timothy's."

TRANSITION

Now, two things they teach at seminary not to do when you are giving a sermon is to make the sermon all about yourself and, even worse, to make yourself look like Jesus.

Forgive me as I might do both here this morning.

Over the summer, your vestry and I did our own version of a ‘DTR’ as we met in the Narthex, one beautiful Saturday morning, and looked deep into each other’s eyes and came out with some clarity on who were to one another.

It was NOT QUITE Peter’s Confession at Caesarea Phillipi but an important moment in our relationship with one another in our own little corner of Christendom.

No one blinked... and we decided to move forward come this Fall with me no longer as Priest-in-Charge but as Rector of St. Timothy’s.

I have always joked that my family and I had bought a house and thus already made a 30-year commitment to Fairfax County and Herson, and by extension St. Tim’s. But that July Saturday was where we did it, where we mutually agreed to walk together, to DTR as Rector, beginning in October contractually, and then with a Celebration of New Ministry in November.

I thank the Vestry for their support and I feel, a little bit in my soul, that God was saying: “Welcome Home Charles” in that moment.

I have a priest friend who has been in ministry for a bit longer than me. She explained the arc of her career this way.

She said “I LIKED working for the first church out of seminary as an Associate”

And “I LOVED working as a college chaplain at a big university ECM”

She said “I HATED working for the Diocese” but she then said “I never felt at *home*” until her current job as rector of a church. That felt like *home*.

“Home” is that inestimable quality that we all search for in our lives, with our families, and with our friends, and finally with our church.

When we say “Welcome Home”—it’s a statement of fact, but it’s also a prayer, a longing, a deep hope, that oneself and others can find a spiritual place to be who we really are, and also that we can find a place that can help us *find out exactly who* we really are.

WELCOME HOME:

That’s a tall order, but that’s the work we are engaged in, to welcome each other to the Home that God has already prepared for us.

To define the relationships, DTR, to tell the truth, and to reach out with God’s healing embrace to one another.

That process is already underway of course in so many areas of our common life, we are in the 3rd and final week of our Haiti Agape, where we continue to define and redefine the 14 year relationship that we have had with this school in Haiti, one that most of us have never been to, that most of us will never go to.

Yet, we see their faces, we look into their eyes, we hear their cries, in Roger Bowen's words from last week.

"Who do you say that I am?" Jesus asks.

Who are they to us?" Who is our neighbor? Can we welcome them home to their precious school?

We know we can't do everything but we look for God's help to know what we can do. St. Timothy's, you... we... have been building such relationships: defining and redefining them for more than 150 years, here in Herndon and all over the world.

Today is Welcome Home Sunday and I have said this before, every Episcopal Church in the country thinks they are "welcoming." All of us put it in our mission statement and on our website, as if the red doors magically communicate the idea.

To be welcoming, I believe, you have to have programs in place that people can participate in and find a home in and find themselves.

We have a magnificent choir that does exactly that, we have a Preschool with the most sterling of reputations, we have the only Spanish-speaking congregation in the North Fairfax region.

To that, we have been adding more:

A Godly Play program that bursts with excitement and joy.

The reappearance of an acolyte ministry, an 'Army of One' currently, but nonetheless something that other parents and youth can see as a possibility

For youth, today we begin "Outside Church" a new-old idea of an experiential and joyful time of fellowship and formation for our tweens and teens.

We have a revamped coffee hour and new life in our Adult Formation offerings.

"Welcome" to all these and I invite you help us to define what they are by participating and leading and offering feedback about them (St. Timothy's does not have a problem with that last one!)

RECTOR:

Now, here is the moment you have all been waiting for, the reason you hired me.

To unearth some historical nugget that proves everything from our storied history, to welcome us all home with some piece of arcane trivia that serves as home-cooking for new and old alike.

First, note that our Scripture passage, Peter's confession, is famous because it has been used as the 'DTR', as the defining and guiding idea behind the Pope in Rome, the apostolic succession going through Peter and the key to the kingdom.

Not all Biblical scholars are in agreement about this, needless to say, that that's what Jesus is saying, and the entirety of the Anglican tradition, one might say, stands in opposition to that idea.

But, we take leadership and hierarchy and succession seriously.

The diversity of gifts allows for the notion of someone "in charge" and a "rock that you build a church."

It's customary, on the invitation for the Celebration of New Ministry for yours truly in November, to put the number of Rector in succession that one is. 3rd, 5th, 15th, etc.

I have engaged in deep research, in our parish archives, and with our Parish Historian, in our registries, and with the historiographer of the Diocese, and professors from the seminary, about the numerical succession that I fall in

The fruits of our research has landed on the number 20 as the closest judgement. St. Timothy's as you might know, in its proud history, went through a period as a Mission Church, with not full parochial status. It was subsumed and released with the larger Truro Parish. Our determination, nonetheless, is that there have been 19 individuals who have preceded me.

CONCLUSION

In that grouping, there have been sinners and saints. Those who served for a while, and those who served briefly. There have been household names to many of you and those lost to history. I care deeply about that succession, I am proud to join that number, and I committed to carrying the deposit of faith, in the words of our patron Timothy, from one generation to the next. To say "Welcome Home" to all those who enters these doors.

AMEN