

Annual Meeting 2010 – Sermon and Report
St. John's Episcopal Church
November 14, 2010
The Rev. Susan J. Latimer, Rector

A week ago Friday I travelled back from a leadership conference outside of Milwaukee. My first flight was from Milwaukee to Chicago – a short up-in-the-air and then you're there flight. Milwaukee airport had some interesting extras.

There was a large and well-stocked used book store, mostly hardbacks, nice wooden shelves filled with all kinds of books where I could have done most of my Christmas shopping, if I had had time.

It goes without saying that there was lots of cheese, including these things called cheese curds which I won't try to explain.

But my favorite part of the Milwaukee airport had to do with their security check-point.

Those of you who have flown in the past few years will know the drill – As you get close to the security check-point, you begin to think carefully about all the things you have to take off and put through separately.

Jackets, sweatshirts, scarves and vests all come off – everything but your bottom layer of shirt - and go in the grey plastic bin.

Change in your pockets, large metal jewelry, cellphones, laptops, cameras, even belts, often have to come off and be put through separately.

Don't forget your quart sized bag of tiny toiletries. And your shoes.

I think carefully about what kind of shoes I wear on the plane – weighing comfort against ease of removal.

And then you say a prayer that you haven't forgotten some contraband in your carry-on that will set off the alarm – like hand cream or hand sanitizer or a half-drunk bottle of water that you forgot to take out of the side pocket.

Sometimes even a large apple will cause your bag to go through the scanner more than once, while you are on the other, side, frantically trying to scoop up all your belongings before someone else does by mistake.

You remember.

So, as I walked through the scanner and was pulling together all my parts which had been scattered into 3 bins and several small bowls, I looked up and saw a large sign.

RECOMBOBULATION AREA.

After waiting in line like cattle to go through security, acutely aware that because you wore shoes with laces you are holding up someone in back of you who is about to miss their plane, all of a sudden you are in a wide open space, free to take your time and pull yourself, or yourselves, back together, without being in anyone's way.

The Recombobulation area in the Milwaukee airport consists of a spacious area with many chairs situated in convenient configurations. There was room for the family with 6 children to have a place all to themselves to recombobulate.

There was room for others who required more time, the elderly, or differently abled, or those with babies and strollers.

The Recombobulation area, of course, presumes that you have been previously discombobulated.

Miriam Webster defines discombobulate as:

To Upset, or Confuse

I especially like the Synonyms – *addle, baffle, bamboozle, beat, befog, befuddle, bemuse, bewilder, buffalo, confound, disorient, flummox, fox, fuddle, maze, muddle, muddy, mystify, perplex, pose, puzzle, and vex.*

I venture to say that events over the past year at St. John's have left many of us feeling discombobulated.

It's a great word. Discombobulated.

Many of us, myself included, have been upset AND confused - and perhaps even bewildered, disoriented, flummoxed, mystified, perplexed and vexed by the manner in which the conflict in the parish played itself out.

And so the Vestry engaged the Alban Institute, and specifically our consultant, Susan Nienaber, to help us move out of our state of discombobulation.

We received the 6 page report, and the Vestry last week voted unanimously to work on both of the major areas the consultant defined that need work –

the Rector-parish bond,

and some particular unhealthy aspects of the congregational culture.
And so we, as a parish, are in a time of Recombobulation.

We could look at this next year as a **Recombobulation Area** for the parish.

What are the tools that we will need to navigate this recombobulation?

First of all, we need time and space – it helps not to feel rushed.

To push the metaphor a bit - if it takes someone longer to tie their shoes or put their backpack back together – we can graciously allow them some space to do so.

Secondly, we will continue to need some outside assistance (particularly for us to work on the unhealthy part of the congregational culture).

The Vestry has already shown a desire to continue some work with Susan Nienaber of the Alban Institute.

Thirdly, we need God's help. We can each pray for the parish in our daily prayers, and we can continue to ask God's guidance as we move forward together.

Lastly, we all need to participate.

*“For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth;
the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.
But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating;
for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight.”
Isaiah 65*

Isaiah brought this message - God's message of radical hope -
to a deeply discombobulated people.

The people who heard this message were returning to Jerusalem
after their long exile.

They returned to a monumental task:

Rebuild their lives in a city of ruins.

Rebuild their religious life while the temple is in ruins.

They had turned away from God, and suffered much in their exile.

But now God calls them back, despite their unfaithfulness,

God promises them joy and delight.

This message of radical hope speaks to us, when we fear that we are stuck in our regret, our loss, our sin, with no way out.

Isaiah assures us that

There is nothing “that is beyond the capacity of God to change.”

(Martha Sterne)

Perhaps God is the Great Recombobulator.

St. John’s is a great parish with a great future.

I am reminded of Alan Jones, former Dean of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, who said that most of us do not do the difficult work of spiritual growth willingly – most of us have to be dragged kicking and screaming into a situation in which this spiritual growth is required.

I believe that God now calls us

into a time of difficult and important work together.

I believe that God has called us into this time of spiritual work

in which all of us are called to stretch and grow,

so that we may come out the other side

Recombobulated

Peaceful, Centered, and with a sense of clarity about our way forward.

And then, A Recombobulated People, we can move forward into the future that God desires for us, a future of joy and delight, and, yes, hard work.

A future where we can more fully reach out into the world in Christ’s name, in the hope that all can find a home in God’s healing love.

Amen.