



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea
*The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida*

10-10-10 Sermon
August 6, 2023

“The Best Kept Secret – The Episcopal Church and St. Andrew's By-the-Sea”
A Homily by the Rev'd Jo P. Popham

We have shared this statistic with you before. The average Episcopalian invites someone to church every 37 years. I am not sure where I first heard this, but many have repeated it. (And if you say something three times it must be true, right?) I think I may have heard it first from Brian McLaren, the prominent Christian pastor, author, activist and speaker and leading figure in the emerging church movement,. He is the first person I recall calling the Episcopal Church the best kept secret of our times. And I ask myself, why? Don't we want to share something we love with others? If we have a favorite recipe, we are not shy in sharing with friends and neighbors. So why? Why is it so hard to share our church?

I also heard the late, great comedian Robin Williams call the Episcopal Church the best kept secret. He and we cannot think of any reason why people not would want to be part of a loving, liberating, _____ place to worship? Robin William's once listed these top 10 reasons to be an Episcopalian:

10. No snake handling.
 9. You can believe in dinosaurs.
 8. Male and female God created them; male and female we ordain them.
 7. You don't have to check your brains at the door.
 6. Pew aerobics.
 5. Church year is color-coded.
 4. Free wine on Sunday.
 3. All of the pageantry – none of the guilt.
 2. You don't have to know how to swim to get baptized.
- And the Number One reason to be an Episcopalian:*
1. No matter what you believe, there's bound to be at least one other Episcopalian who agrees with you.

Jim has often said that if you gathered 12 Episcopalians you likely would have 13 differing opinions on any given subject. And that is the beauty of being an Episcopalian. As Anglicans we have always been known as the *via media*, the middle way. And that

allows for extremes in both directions. We can agree and disagree and still love one another! Our range of acceptability is so wide, which is another way of saying that we open our arms to offer love to all people, regardless of anyone's belief system. As people of God who worship from a Common Book of Prayer, we don't fear what our super sensitive politically correct friends and neighbors in this wonderfully diverse world of ours might think. We might care deeply about an issue, but we do not try to force our opinions on others. That is not to say that we do to hold our beliefs tightly, no, but we are defined by how we treat our neighbors, our non-Christian neighbors, our friends of differing faith and those of no faith at all?

So how do we talk about our faith and our belief system to them?

We are all gathered here today because we love God through Jesus, and we know God better by coming here to an Episcopal Church to learn more about Jesus. We have confidence in God's constancy based on God's Holy Word and the stories about our Lord Jesus who is the Christ. But most of all we can trust Jesus because we see him alive and active in the world as we travel the road with those of all faiths and no faith at all. And we have a responsibility to be Jesus's representatives in our diverse world interacting with other believers and non-believers, and with seekers. My friends, it is time for us Episcopalians to be proactive in promoting what I believe is the most welcoming and inclusive and loving church today. And St. Andrew's By-the-Sea reflects the welcoming inclusive and loving nature Jesus. We shouldn't keep what we have a secret. We need to share – no, we must share – our *via media* – our middle way – our ability to live with ambiguity.

But I still wonder why we treat our church and this church specifically differently than anything else we love or enjoy. Don't we share a good book with our friends? Or a new restaurant we enjoy? Or that recipe for Weight Watcher's chili? Or the new block buster movie or a streaming series we binged on last week? I think I know why. Evangelism traditionally has never been part of the Episcopal ethos. But I say it is! So many Americans are disaffected with the church because of their past experiences. Or they are

disenchanted with church because they see Christians as hypocritical, not living as Christ taught. But who would not want to be part of a loving inclusive non-judgmental church where all are welcome?

Why then are we such a secret? And how can we change that statistic about inviting people once every 37 years to often? Perhaps it is how we invite people. Not being evangelists is not a good excuse, because we are all evangelists, we just don't know it.

And once new people cross our threshold, it matters how we welcome them when they get here, and how we connect them into our community in the weeks and months after their first visit. Here at St. Andrew's I trust that people feel welcome, not-with-standing the necessity to lock our doors. We are forbidden to carry a gun into any Episcopal Church. And this ban on bringing a weapon into the church was in effect long before the killing of parishioners in one of our churches outside Birmingham. And I am certain that there are ministries that people want to have a hand in, particularly being the hands of Christ in the Blue Door ministry helping the unhoused here in Destin.

So again, I ask: why? Why keep The Episcopal Church a secret? Why keep St. Andrew's By-the-Sea a secret? No reason. There is no reason. We just need to have courage and be willing to take "No" or "Maybe" as real answers. I think we need to invite people by simply saying: "Come and See." My friends, let the Spirit speak through us as we reveal this wonderful secret to all. Does that mean we will have an influx of newly invited visitors next week. No indeed. We are after all almost afraid to evangelize. We would never want to intrude on anyone else's beliefs, right? We would not want to hurt anyone's feelings insinuating that they are not saved if they don't believe as we. No, in fact, we are all already saved by our Lord's act of saving mercy on the cross. No, we would never want to appear as though we are the way, the only way, to believe, because we are not. We are not the exclusive only way to believe. We are part of the way. And there are many on the road with us, and on different roads. But I trust that we are a loving inclusive way, part – and only a part – of the Jesus Movement that leads to joy and happiness for all those who love the Lord and want to love him more. Ask your friends to

come and see, and let them know that they are loved by their creator and his Son. And how will they know? They will know because the Holy Spirit is here with us, right here, to guide us to open our loving arms to all believers and non-believers.

Lord, may it be so. Amen.