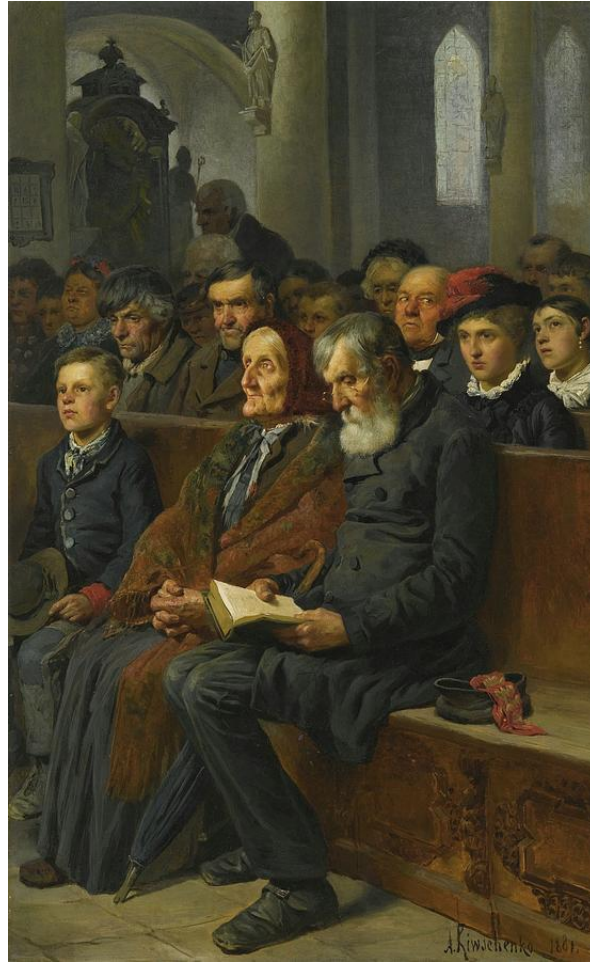


St. John's, Bridgeport



James 2:1 "My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our . . . Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God

chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him?"

Twenty years ago this very month, I became the Rector at St. John's Episcopal Church in Bridgeport, CT. The oldest Christian church in that town, which is now the largest city in the state, where P.T. Barnam was once mayor, and whose his most famous and exotic house, Iranistan, was on the same block as the church, and where Charles Stratton, better known as "Tom Thumb," was baptized at the parish. Indeed P.T. Barnum was moving his famous Barnum Museum in New York, the most popular tourist attraction in the whole world at that time, to Bridgeport when he died, because Bridgeport at that point in time thought it was becoming the 'new' New York. Thus Frederick Law Olmstead, the designer of Central Park in New York, was hired by City of Bridgeport to design Seaside and then Beardsley park. And the church building of St. John's built at that time, seats 1,000 people, and was designed by the same architect who built St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York. Moreover, the church boasts an 80-foot stone reredos behind the High Altar sculpted by Gutzon Borglum, famous for his sculpture of Mount Rushmore.

But in the 20<sup>th</sup> century many of the wealthy white industrialists, bankers, and manufacturers in Bridgeport moved to the growing suburbs and built even bigger homes, while their

workers began to take over their former mansions in the city. In the 1960's, former subjects of the British Empire from the Caribbean islands, or India, or South Africa, or the South Pacific, as English-speaking Anglicans, were not surprisingly attracted to St. John's. As their numbers grew, more and more of the white members from the suburbs stopped coming into town for church. Jamaicans soon made up the majority of my Vestry. Two years into my tenure I added a Spanish language Mass on Sundays at noon, as there were very many Hispanics living in the shadow of our steeple. Some of those Hispanic communicants began to come early to Mass and participate at the Coffee Hour after the English-speaking 10:00 Service. There was some issue about 'those people' coming to 'our' coffee hour, but others went out of their way to welcome them. There was a Haitian congregation in Stamford that had been holding services once a month in Bridgeport, as more and more of the Haitians moved out of Stamford because of the high cost of housing there. Eventually representatives from the Bridgeport group came to me to form a separate congregation and have a weekly Haitian Service at St. John's. We became then one church, with four congregations, with four services each Sunday, speaking English, Spanish, French, and Creole, and with members of each congregation serving on the Vestry and participating together in education and outreach programs.

The once famous wealthy white congregation had become then a diverse group of poorer people, and there were indeed regular struggles to learn how to live together with one another, and to respect each other, and not show favoritism. But the four congregations clearly united together to work on our outreach programs, on our ongoing Tuesday Night Supper for the poor, for example, one of first seven such dinners started by the Bridgeport Council of Churches in the 1970s. In my day we added a bi-monthly Food Bank in the basement of the old stone Rectory, again in coordination with the Council of Churches. We created a Family Center on the first floor of the Rectory to provide a variety of services to our neighborhood families, and we rented out offices on the second floor to local non-profits, like the Brazilian Workers' Center, Job Corp, and a Hispanic non-profit organized around sports. We turned the Sunday School rooms during the week into a Preschool, serving the struggling families in our neighborhood, where all of our students were on public assistance. When I began the Spanish Mass, I had invited the local Literacy Volunteer group to start English and Citizenship classes every Saturday in the large Parish Hall, that was once a chapel for the church in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for small weddings, seating 200 or so. The English classes soon had more than one hundred students each week, and not so much from the Spanish-speaking congregation as I expected but more from

the Moslem world. Thus, we became partners with the Bridgeport Islamic Community Center across the street from us, who had bought up the old Congregational church.

Five times a year, the four congregations of St. John's worshipped together, Easter, Pentecost, Lesson & Carols, and Christmas Eve, and we did so in a magnificent multi-lingual, multi-cultural service that included the English choir singing Renaissance mass settings (Tom was our Organist & Choirmaster there), a wonderful Haitian children's drum Corp, a handbell choir, and our swinging Latin band. We sang African American spirituals and Spanish folk songs and English hymns. French was harder for the group to grasp. Once a year we had what we called our International Fiesta, a parish-wide pop-luck dinner where members from all four congregations came together to share with one another the food, the drink, and the dress of their ancestral homelands. At first, of course, the groups still broke up along ethnic lines, the West Indians over there, the Southern Americans there, the Haitians here. But soon the returning congregations were asking each other to be sure to bring back their favorite dishes and drinks.

We humans, in the end, are tribal by nature. It is hard to break down the walls that divide us, but it can be done, even though it can be uncomfortable at times to deal with the strangers in our midst, those with different cultural or social

customs, with 'the Other.' And yet we are called by Our Lord to "love our neighbor as ourself." And when pressed about that, about 'who is our neighbor,' Jesus told the beloved parable of the Good Samaritan, where the hated half-breed Samaritan was the hero; not the Jewish priest or the religious Levite, but the despised foreigner was the one truly caring for his neighbor.

One year, St. John's began to invite our neighboring Episcopal congregations of the Bridgeport Deanery to come join us for our annual Pentecost Sunday celebration, to hear others actually speaking in foreign tongues on Pentecost, one of our multi-cultural, multi-lingual grand celebrations in a church filled with red helium balloons attached to every pew and choir stall. Soon, two of our neighboring Episcopal churches literally canceled their own services that Sunday to join us, with their choirs singing with ours, and with one hiring a bus to bring their members there. One year, the then 3 Deaf Episcopal congregations in the Diocese joined us as well, with an American Sign Language interpreter, as we all watched them sing with their hands. The number of 'outsiders' at that service from other congregations grew year after year after year, as a unique experience of the diversity and the beauty of the Christian church.

Five years ago this week, I retired from St. John's after 15 years there, and forty years as a parish priest. I was tired

and worn out. But I do miss my time there. I miss their enthusiastic congregational singing, with a little bit of dancing in the aisle sometimes, and the swaying to Latin music. I miss the racial and cultural diversity of that place in our struggle to welcome all the children of God into the church; black, white, brown, coming from so many different countries and places, with different experiences of life, speaking different languages, most of them poor and struggling to survive. This, I believe, is what the Gospel is about, bringing all these different people together, working together, worshipping together, caring for one another, in a reasonably successful way, but never completely so. We certainly had people, some long-term members of that parish even, leave St. John's during my tenure because of clashes with 'those people,' who do things differently, who don't respect the things we respect, who don't look like us, dress like us, speak the same language or think like us, who may be in dirty clothes even, who may smell, or may just be a bit mentally 'touched.'

Bridgeport, where I served my last 15 years of full-time ministry, is a wonderfully diverse city with no ethnic majority anywhere within the city. Bridgeport doesn't have black and white neighborhoods or Hispanic areas. We all lived together. Yet the suburbs that surround the City of Bridgeport are 94-98% white. The causes for this discrepancy between a racially

diverse Bridgeport and its monochromatic suburbs are many and complex. It is much more than the historic redlining of certain neighborhoods after the Second World War, since that has been illegal now for more than 50 years. We humans are at first naturally uncomfortable with the 'other,' with the person who is different from us, from a different social-economic status. Or to put it another way, we feel more safe and secure surrounded by people who look like us, think like us, believe what we believe, and speak the same language as we do. We are tribal by nature, but our real tribe should be the whole human race.

When I pressed my suburban clergy friends about their lily-white congregations, they would blame it on the fact that that's simply the make-up of their towns. "But why is it the make-up of your town?" I often asked. "And what are you doing about this modern form of segregation?" "Everyone is welcome in our church," they say. "What else can we do?" I usually suggested that they begin by looking at the level of affordable housing in their community, mandated now 30 years ago by the State of Connecticut to be at 10% or more of the housing stock in each of the municipalities of the State, and yet those suburbs remarkably had less than 3-4% affordable housing, and again and again projects to introduce more affordable housing into their towns were turned down! Never because of overt racism, mind you, or because of any prejudice against the poor, but always because



of other things like the increased traffic flow, or population density, or just the wrong location for the project. Recently, the high school students in Westport were asked to write an essay on White Privilege, which caused quite a raucous among their parents with its racial implications. One parent was quoted in the newspaper as actually saying, "Anyone is welcome to live in Westport, if they can afford it", blind to the actual barriers that defined her town! We are often conveniently blind to the obstacles that we create in our communities.

St. James reveals that the early Christian community struggled in the same way as it moved out of the Jewish capital of Jerusalem, and soon spread into the rural hills of Galilee and Samaria, and then into Asia Minor later, as Greeks and Gentiles also began to be a part of the early Church. So, St. James reminds us in today's reading, that if we show partiality among our neighbors that we commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. St. James concludes by asking us all, "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if we say we have faith but do not have good works? Can faith save us? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of us says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet we do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So, faith by itself, if it has no good works, is dead." Amen.