

Chapter 1: A Glass Darkly

Description of the Problem

Today at All Souls, there is new energy around mission and outreach. Attendance continues to grow slowly, new ventures build, and we have engaged an enormous proportion of the congregation in a successful capital campaign. But we are not sure how to go forward. God has cared for us and shaped us, but we wonder where God might be leading next. The broad goal of this project has been to help us reflect on ourselves even as we aim to define ourselves better, reach out better, and grow into the future. Beauty seems to be one means by which God is leading us.

Through prayer, worship, and ministry the parish has met God and continues to experience God in “the beauty of holiness.” This phrase is used often around Anglican worship and spirituality and is found in Psalms 29:2, 96:9, and 110:3. It also appears in the Book of Common Prayer as an antiphon for Morning Prayer, in the canticle *Venite*, the opening sentences for Evening Prayer, and the liturgy for the Consecration of a Church.

In fact, a lot of parish energy is involved with what might be described as works of beauty—work in our gardens, the music, the liturgy, acts of compassion and kindness—all of which is reflected and refracted by our stained glass windows. Even if we have not always articulated it, beauty for us, goes beyond appearance. It has to do with more than can be named in quantity or quality. Beauty is dynamic and filled with energy. It is from God, and I would argue, that beauty has moved and motivated All Souls through some of its most difficult times.

All Souls was founded as a mission of St. Alban's Parish in 1911. With the leadership of a charismatic rector, the Rev. Dr. James MacBride Sterrett, All Souls gained status as an independent parish of the Diocese of Washington in 1913. While the idea that an Episcopal church would be a "memorial" church (rather than a church dedicated to a particular saint or theological doctrine) might seem strange to some, Dr. Sterrett brought a wonderfully mixed range of experiences with him to All Souls. He began life as a Presbyterian, spent a number of years as a Unitarian, and during much of his Episcopal ministry, taught Hegelian Philosophy. The name "All Souls Memorial," combines one of the most Roman Catholic feast days with the more Protestant practice of establishing a memorial church for a particular person or family. This mixture of Catholic and Protestant, blending in a truly catholic unity, has continued to shape the parish.

After serving All Souls "without money or without price" for six years, Dr. Sterrett decided to retire as rector and encouraged the vestry to extend a call to his son, The Rev. Henry Hatch Dent Sterrett. In 1917, the younger Rev. Sterrett began as rector, while Dr. Sterrett, Sr. continued as associate rector. All historical sketches of the parish mention this transition as being a smooth one, but an important piece of the story had been left out of the parish history.

The Washington Post put it bluntly on June 1, 1923: "Clergyman Ends Life with Bullet: 'It's all over now, son,' Dr. Sterrett says, as he pulls trigger of revolver." Having suffered from ill health and melancholia for some months, Dr. Sterrett ended his life at the family home, about two miles from the church. The article states that the younger Sterrett was "greatly affected by the untimely ending of his father's life and is said to be

bordering on a complete breakdown.”⁵ The dramatic journalism of the day notwithstanding, H. H. Dent Sterrett managed to transform his grief into energy for the parish, and just a year after Dr. Sterrett’s suicide, the parish completed a major renovation and expansion of the building. Dent Sterrett successfully served as rector of the parish for another 25 years and beauty showed itself in more than the form of a new building. Beauty brought a deepened sense of community that helped All Souls get through its grief. A similar movement of beauty can be seen helping the parish navigate the Great Depression, as donors filled the church through the late 1920s and 1930s with stained glass windows by Willet Studios, Lamb Studios, Harry Wright Goodhue, and Tiffany. Some would say these were beautiful objects. Others might argue they were hideous things to spend money on while people on the other side of the windows were hungry or hurting. But even among things meant to be pretty or ornamental, beauty was working beyond the visual as windows that were dedicated to the memory of loved ones facilitated grief and served as guides to the stories and saints of the Church.

Just as it nurtured the parish through the founding rector’s suicide, I would argue the “beauty of holiness” helped the parish through the AIDS pandemic of the late 1980s and early 1990s, as All Souls offered funerals, memorials, welcome, and sanctuary. Beauty showed itself even through tears, pain, and suffering that made no sense.

In the later 1980s, attendance and energy at All Souls began to decrease. Many parishioners were aging and no longer attended church. Some moved to the suburbs. Others left the parish after the rector was discovered to be having an affair and was

⁵ "Clergyman Ends Life with Bullet; 'It's all Over Now, Son,' Dr. Sterrett Says, as He Pulls Trigger of Revolver," *The Washington Post* June 1, 1923, 1923, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *The Washington Post* (1877-1994), 4.

forced to resign. The building began to show its age and some wondered if All Souls would survive.

But then, at an all-time low for the parish, beauty was mobilized once again. The priest-in-charge hired a musician who not only could create splendid music on Sundays, but attracted newcomers by building a choir and opened the church more to the community through a series of concerts and recitals. Music, liturgy, and pastoral care combined to form an aesthetic impulse that encouraged growth and renewal.

Though All Souls was founded as a church that avoided liturgical and theological extremes,⁶ especially since the early 1990s its growth in numbers has been accompanied by an increasingly “high church” worship style. While not technically Anglo-Catholic (a parish within the Anglican Communion founded with the expressed purpose of living out the fullest liturgical and sacramental traditions of the Catholic faith), our worship and spirituality are deeply influenced by the liberal catholic tradition of Anglicanism. We light candles, burn incense, and if something can be chanted, it usually is. The Blessed Sacrament is reserved and the Stations of the Cross are prayed in Lent. We refer to the Eucharist as “Mass” and four days a week a small handful of people gather early for Matins, the daily office of Morning Prayer.

The last thorough survey of the congregation was done in 2006, and even though the results are dated, they still accurately reflect the makeup of the parish. In that survey, 18% were between 20 and 39 years of age, 54% between 40 and 59, 25% between 60 and 79, and only 3% aged 80 and over. The parish was roughly 60% male and 40% female.

⁶ In a 1913 sermon the founding rector, the Rev. Dr. James MacBride Sterrett outlined his vision that the new parish be “Neither a broad church nor a narrow church, neither a high church nor a low church, but a church of All Souls.”

The parish was 90% white, 4% African American, 3% Hispanic/Latino, 2% Asian, and 2% other. 46% of the parish was single and 54% was partnered or married. 24% of the 226 people in the survey said they had been lifelong Episcopalians and 30% became Episcopalians at All Souls. Of those who joined the parish, 33% had been Roman Catholics, 20% Baptists, 14% Lutheran, 10% Unitarian, and 14% said they had explored or continue to explore Buddhism. In terms of education, 29% are college graduates and 58% have done post graduate studies.

All Souls is located in Woodley Park, a vibrant and busy neighborhood very close to the National Zoo. The neighborhood feels young, with many graduate students and young professionals in the area. The neighborhood has some older adults who either own their homes or rent at stabilized levels and there are a few urban poor in the neighborhood—several people who make their home on the streets and interact with the community, and a small number who live in a nearby halfway house for those with mental illness.

We are surrounded by other churches—four of them Episcopal. St. Margaret’s Church is 1.9 miles away. St. Alban’s Church, the National Cathedral, and St. Thomas Church are each about 1.6 miles away. And yet, each of our parishes has a slightly different character. Within a mile there are also Lutheran, Roman Catholic, U.C.C., and Quaker congregations. The Islamic Center of Washington is also very close to us, as are several synagogues.

One of the ways All Souls differentiates itself from other congregations is in our commitment and passion for “the beauty of holiness.” Though our gardens and building are lovely, we are careful to offer worship services that are consistent, Anglican, and

offer the best we can in terms of music, thought, prayer, and service. “Traditional worship; progressive thinking” is the slogan we have used for a few years to try to describe our use of the Prayer Book’s Elizabethan English, while at the same time capturing a sense of our openness and encouragement of women and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) people toward full membership and leadership in the church.

Given that we all bring our own understandings of beauty to church and differ in what we might find beautiful, how might we tap into the beauty of God to transcend difference and perhaps even include difference? This is a question we ask especially as we try to welcome our neighbors and visitors. Even though slightly more than one-third of our parish comes from outside Woodley Park (and many come from Maryland and Virginia), we are blessed with people in our midst and a neighborhood at our doorstep and we want to be as inviting, open, and hospitable as possible. At the same time, we don’t want to sacrifice what we believe to be beautiful worship in the effort to attract newcomers. We are not convinced that we need to, but want to be careful that we’re not trying to “see through a glass darkly,”⁷ fooling ourselves into believing we see clearly. We want to be open to wherever God may be leading us.

According to the 2010 U.S. Census data, a three-mile radius around the church’s 20008 zip code (which includes Woodley Park and several other neighborhoods) reveals an affluent and well-educated population.⁸ 27.8% of household incomes were between \$50,000 and \$99,999. 24% of incomes were between \$100,000 and \$199,999, and 13%

⁷ 1 Corinthians 13:12.

⁸ *The New ExecutiveInsite Report* Experian, Decision Insite/MissionInsite,[2013]).

of households had an annual income of over \$200,000. The zip code is mostly white (52%), with other races represented as follows: Black 26%, Asian 6%, Hispanic/Latino 14%, and multiracial 3%. Within this area, 53% of the people have never been married and 34% are married or partnered. 37% of the population in the three-mile radius have graduate degrees. The neighborhood is fairly young, with almost 18% of the population being between 20 and 24 years of age (college/career starts), and 25.3% between 25 and 34 (singles & young families). Older aged persons are not as highly represented, probably reflecting the high cost of housing and the tendency to retire to more affordable areas.

The “mosaic mix” is particularly interesting and seems to reflect the complexity of many of the people who attend All Souls. Developed by the Experian marketing and research group, “mosaics” take into consideration various socio-economic and life-stage factors. According to this data, at least half the population around the parish can be described as “young, city solos, urban edge,” “suburban style, soulful spender,” or “power elite, jet set urbanites.” Religious affiliation is also interesting with 21% saying it is “important to attend religious services,” 48.3% agreeing “I consider myself a spiritual person,” and 19% affirming “my faith is really important to me.”

The mosaic description of our neighborhood is a fascinating way of looking at some of the people who visit us, and seems like an especially good way of trying to understand some of the people who do NOT (yet) visit us. While the parish has been accepting of new people and, for the most part, wants to grow, we seem to have reached a plateau. For at least the last fifteen or twenty years, All Souls has been bumping up against the “rule of 150.” The 8 a.m. service normally has 30 to 35 people, regardless of

weather, holidays, or guest preachers. The 11 a.m. service typically has between 135 to 160 persons attending, and these numbers have not really changed much in the last fifteen years. This kind of average Sunday attendance is what Israel Galindo and others have termed a “Shepherding-Size” congregation. A church consultant and professor of Christian Education, Galindo comments, “When [such a congregation] nears the 150 membership point, it seems to become anxious about its inability to grow larger.” Galindo elaborates on essayist and author Malcolm Gladwell’s “Rule of 150.”⁹ Galindo explains, “When more than 150 persons are involved, structural matters impede a group’s ability to agree on issues and to act with one voice.”¹⁰ All kinds of expectations flow from the fact of our size: how the rector interacts with the parish, the quality of our music and liturgy, the way we talk about money and conduct stewardship campaigns, and certainly the way we respond to strangers and newcomers.

Before we can “act with one voice,” we need to find our voice as a parish, or at least narrow the various voices that we use to describe who we are. Professor James Hopewell argues for the importance of a congregation having a story and being able to tell its story clearly. This story is usually related to some overarching tale, an image, or a myth. Hopewell writes, “To survive, a community must develop and maintain a specific, and therefore particular, constellation of outlooks and values. Unless it possesses a distinctive character recognizable to its members, the community dissolves in anomie. A group needs to identify ‘who we are’ in order to embody its otherwise amorphous

⁹ Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company: 2000) 179.

¹⁰ Israel Galindo, *The Hidden Lives of Congregations: Understanding Congregational Dynamics* (Herndon, Va.: Alban Institute, 2004), 83.

sentiments and actions.”¹¹ Our “Traditional worship; progressive thinking” slogan has served us well but we wonder how we might go deeper in self-understanding, and then self-explanation.

The question about the use of beauty and whether beauty can be combined with faithful action is also an issue affecting the larger Episcopal Church. In its desire to attract newcomers and to share Christ with a diverse world, does the Church apologize for beauty, or veil it in some way, or ignore it completely? As the denomination embraces change and adapts to culture, could it be that the Episcopal Church overlooks one of its greatest treasures and risks losing a part of its soul along the way?

The Episcopal Church underwent a survey from 2004 to 2008 in a study called the Episcopal Identity Project. In its report, the study grouped various themes that a large sampling of people identified as important in understanding oneself as an Episcopalian. One bishop who took part in the study said, “The beauty and shape of our liturgy, and the way that that can be found throughout the Episcopal Church, going from church to church, having prayer and all of the other rites available to us can make one, wherever you travel, feel a little bit at home.”¹² The Report goes on to say, “Both “cradle” Episcopalians and converts to the Episcopal Church frequently mention experience of the liturgy as an important appeal. Episcopalians are drawn by the rich history, beauty, and flexibility of the Episcopal liturgies.”¹³

¹¹ James F. Hopewell, *Congregation: Stories and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 109.

¹² David Gortner et al., *Around One Table*, Expa version ed. (Memphis, Tenn.: Sponsored collaboratively by the College for Bishops and CREDO Institute, Inc., 2009), 136.

¹³ *Ibid.* 57.

Over time, the Anglican Church and the Episcopal Church have made their mark in culture through justice and social action (Civil Rights, women's issues, LGBT issues) and through beauty. The Episcopal Church's beauty has influenced culture through the wide acceptance and use of its marriage rite, through the expectation of national memorials happening at the Cathedral Church of St. Peter and St. Paul (The National Cathedral), and through the tradition of its private schools. And yet, as a denomination and church, we have allowed justice and beauty to go very different ways. One can find many parishes and cathedrals in which justice issues are named and talked about, and yet too often, the eagerness for justice and righteousness does not allow time for prayer. Likewise, some of those Episcopal and Anglican churches that truly celebrate "the beauty of holiness" do so as though we were all living in nineteenth-century England, or in mid-twentieth-century America.

Episcopalians are not alone in having rejected the transcendental virtues of truth, beauty, and goodness, but we differ in some ways from other churches and denominations as to how we fill the void. Writing from a non-denominational perspective, church-founder and pastor Brian Zahnd argues for the reclamation of beauty as a means of evangelism. He makes a point that "we" (and here, I believe his argument applies more to Reformed, Protestant, and theologically conservative churches) have over-emphasized "truth." He writes

With an emphasis on truth, we have tried to make Christianity persuasive (as we should). But we also need a corresponding emphasis on beauty to make Christianity attractive. Christianity should not only persuade with truth, but it should also attract with beauty. Along with Christian apologetics, we need Christian aesthetics. Christianity needs ... to be

presented as beautiful. Often where truth cannot convince, beauty can entice.¹⁴

Even though the Episcopal Church in most places has not over-emphasized truth, it does seem to have substituted the transcendental values of truth, beauty, and goodness with American values of justice, relevance, and popularity. Plato imagined beauty as encompassing “unity in diversity.” While our contemporary church often gets the diversity part right, we have forgotten how to find unity. Aesthetical theologian Alejandro (Alex) García-Rivera sheds light on the way in which beauty and action have often veered in different directions as he explains the notion of “splitting.” He suggests that our inability to deal with subtlety is a consequence of the modern mentality we have inherited. He uses the thought of nineteenth-century American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce to argue that the nominalism of William of Ockham (the thirteenth-century English Franciscan philosopher and theologian) has made everything black or white. As Peirce saw it, “Modernity sliced reality into twos: mind and matter, nature and culture, materialism and idealism, feelings and thought. Ockham’s razor sliced to pieces what is in actuality a continuum.”¹⁵ A blessing of our living in a postmodern era is that we can re-examine the precepts of modern philosophy and theology and can revisit some of those concepts that might have been cut away too abruptly.

At All Souls, the consistency of our liturgy, along with a robust ministry of pastoral care, mission, fellowship, and hospitality has helped the congregation over the

¹⁴ Brian Zahnd, "Beauty Will Save the World: Rediscovering the Allure and Mystery of Christianity," *Christianity Today* 56, no. 2 (February, 2012), 50.

¹⁵ Alex García-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful: A Theological Aesthetics* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1999), 211.

years to move through beauty. Unified in this, we have been able to navigate differences among us with regard to race, gender, economics, class, and sexuality. We have even managed to remain a parish in the nation's capital that keeps peace every four years, even as we take different sides in a presidential election. But where is beauty calling us next?

Both locally and denominationally, I would argue that God is calling us to a new integration of beauty and action (action encompassing mission, works of justice, acts of healing, acts of protest, and more.) Perhaps we are being called to understand beauty less as an object to be obtained and to become more like Dorothy Day (1897—1980), founder of the Catholic Worker Movement, who understood beauty as a subject in which we might participate and be absorbed. Maureen O'Connell, a lay Roman Catholic ethicist and theologian, points out that

The realism in [Dorothy Day's] aesthetic—captured in her descriptions of the dreadful harshness of poverty—invites increased social responsibility rather than moral scapegoating and, as such, becomes a catalyst for beautiful acts of neighbor love that risk entering more fully into the suffering experiences of others rather than romanticizing them ... Day's quest for beauty paradoxically brought her face-to-face with destitution that she found repugnant.¹⁶

Can All Souls Parish move forward in mission? Can more parishioners be actively engaged in living out their faith in mission, responding to God, serving the poor, speaking to injustice, and yet remain strongly committed to their parish?

I believe that the All Souls windows can provide a local and non-threatening starting point for exploring the way to God, using a Franciscan path of beauty into action.

¹⁶ Maureen H. O'Connell, "A Harsh and Dreadful Beauty: The Aesthetic Dimension of Dorothy Day's Ethics" in Laurie M. Cassidy and Maureen H. O'Connell, *She Who Imagines: Feminist Theological Aesthetics* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2012), 174.

This will enable All Souls to be more receptive to those who seek beauty in the world as well as those who seek to act for justice and mercy. Newly equipped, confident, and conversant in our faith, the people of All Souls will be able to act as guides not only for the stained glass windows, but also as guides toward God.