

Sermon preached by the Rev. Stacy Alan
on the occasion of the Requiem Mass for Charley Taylor
April 21, 2021

Jett McAllister, a former member of this parish and an alum of Brent House, where I am the chaplain, introduced me to Charley over ten years ago. As an undergrad, Charley had been involved in the campus ministry of St. Francis House at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. It had shaped him in significant ways—so much so that Jett knew of it all those years later. Because of that experience, and Charley’s desire to support young adults, Jett suggested we invite him to join our board. It was one of the best ideas Jett has probably ever had. (I don’t know if he would agree with that assessment, but it’s my story, and I get to tell it my way!)

It had been a rough spell at Brent House, right after the financial downturn of 2007-2008, and I was still struggling to figure out how to gather a board that could support our ministry with my particular set of gifts. My first meeting with Charley, I believe, was over lunch at Bistro Zinc, of blessed memory, and it was there that I experienced Charley’s particularly charming combination of intelligence, generosity, and warmth. He did end up joining the board and was a blessing to us, helping me—who, like many clergy, is not particularly financially savvy—understand what was going on with our finances, explaining things clearly without judgment and without anxiety, and with his usual good humor.

After Fr. Raymond asked me to preach today, I asked Jett what he thought was important to share about Charley. Among other things, he said this: *Ascension’s motto could be “worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness”* and that the meeting place of worship and beauty were what gave Charley a sense of purpose and joy. From a well-designed bulletin or financial report, to his support of music, to the welcome he gave people like Jett when he first came to Ascension—through all of these ran a through line of beauty. One might say that beauty, for Charley, was also a kind of hospitality.

This brings me to Jesus’ words in the gospel we heard today. I love this text, and its hopefulness and poignancy: Jesus promises a place, a home, for his disciples, but we also can hear the longing and distress in Thomas’ question: “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” This gospel text, especially when we read it at funerals, usually directs our attention beyond, to the afterlife, to the Second Coming, to heaven.

It seems to me that Charley’s life gives us another way to understand Jesus’ words. Bear with me here, since I’m turn this text around: what if this preparation of a place doesn’t lie beyond, but rather right here among us? Christians live perpetually in an in-between time, now and not yet, fulfilled and yet to come. Jesus says that he has gone to prepare a place for us and that he will come to take us to himself, but what if, *what if*, our work is to help him with that? What if our work here, as followers of Jesus, sinners beloved and redeemed by him, what if our work is to help him prepare that place? What if we are to prepare a place for Jesus?

As Christians we do believe in eternal life, in heaven, in that gathering of the redeemed robed in white gathered around the heavenly throne. We also believe that Christ is present with us, now and here, that the Church itself is Christ's body. We believe that in the Eucharist the heavenly dwells among us in the form of Christ's Body and Blood. What if the preparation of a place is what Jesus is doing right here, right now? And what if we are called to help? What if that is the secret that Charley knew in all of the ways that he pursued and celebrated and made space for the beauty of holiness? What if this community, the one that he called home, the one where he loved and was loved, where he struggled and prayed and welcomed and worshiped, what if this community was Jesus already making a place for him?

Jesus has welcomed Charley into his loving embrace. Charley now worships around the throne. He now rests and has found healing and peace in the place Jesus has prepared for all of us. I suspect, though, that much of what he is experiencing now is familiar. It's familiar because he already had a taste of it here, in this space, with these people, nourished by Word and Sacrament, music and community.

Charley, together with this community, has been part of preparing a place where Jesus can welcome all who come searching for him, who come looking for food, both physical and spiritual, who come looking for a place to name their sins and their griefs and their joys and their hopes. Charley has taken his place in the communion of saints and with them we, even today, also take our place before "the Lamb at the center of the throne," who has prepared for us a place both here and beyond, where we, both here and beyond, can worship in the beauty of holiness.