

Amos 8: 4-7
Psalm 113
1 Timothy 2: 1-
Luke 16: 1-13

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St. Martin in-the-Fields
Proper 20 Year C
September 21st, 2025

Tenure in my Heart

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to thee O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. AMEN

Exhilaration and dread make strange bedfellows. I know because I've been toggling between both recently. A new call as interim rector at St. Christopher's Gladwyne was exhilarating at first. But then the dread washed in, as surely as the wave that knocks you to the sand in the ocean.

The new call meant today would soon be here, my farewell Sunday at St. Martin's. Dread pulled me under. But then everything changed. I realized I had it wrong.

Wrong because I thought I was leaving, leaving you behind, which seemed impossible. How could I leave the parish that has sustained and ordained me for thirteen years?

What shifted? I realized you're coming with me, because each of you has tenure in my heart; a place of deep belonging for you and for me, because in our lives together we are held in the life and love of Jesus.

And love, when it is vibrant and alive, makes more and more of us. Desmond Tutu often spoke of the African word "Ubuntu" which means "I am because we are." We have made more of each other at St. Martin's during our time together.

Serving this parish and serving you, in Jesus' name, has filled me with the deepest gratitude – a love that knows it's been blessed. In those quiet moments I had last week walking in Ireland on craggy hills before a wild sea, I remembered how life has unfolded for me these past 13 years.

Like many, I first saw the sign out front of St. Martin's while driving past it a short while after moving here. A quick Google search told me the rector had gone to Union Theological Seminary, my alma mater, and that he was a Virgo. Really? Union a plus, astrological sign, serious oversharing. But I put that aside and walked through the red doors.

I didn't know then that it was a life-changing moment. But I did when I walked through the red doors again seven years later, on December 13th, 2019, to be ordained to the priesthood along with Barbara Ballenger. The organ roared as two choirs and 247 people packed in the pews sang "A Mighty Fortress is Our God."

My heart roared right back with gratitude and humility. It was the culmination of a nine-year odyssey with starts and stops and hairpin turns.

But what was beyond imagining was that I would return to St. Martin's four years later as an Interim Priest Associate; a part-time position that was the perfect counterpoint to chaplaincy job in pediatric oncology. But the unexpected departure of the Interim Rector became another turning point.

When I was told the diocese was going to "get someone to help Laura." I realized I didn't need or want help. I needed—and wanted—to serve St. Martin's with God's help and we needed a lot of it.

It's an understatement to say the church was in turmoil. The staff had been ground down by an abusive and toxic work environment so severe at least two were poised to resign and a third, considering it. Several vestry members had also resigned during the past year.

But we all dug deeper, prayed more, worked harder, and began to come together because of our love for this parish and a deep faith and trust in each other. All of us knew—and know-- in our marrow that the spirit, faith, activism and outreach, mercy and justice, that are the essence of St. Martin's is precious. Together, we laid the foundation for a new future with a new rector.

Cary Nicholas and Rob Jennings, successfully co-chaired the committee which created a parish profile. Superbly led by the incomparable Nikki Wood, the discernment committee worked diligently for months on choosing our new rector. Mary Barber's ministry is proof of their extraordinary achievement.

The church staff was, and is, incredible. Lorie Hershey, Noor Diskan, James Kent and Tyrone Whiting, worked relentlessly. Carol Duncan, our deacon, then was a steadfast clergy colleague. Our fulltime volunteers – the beloved Connie Haggard and the devoted Kate Maus— gave and gave. Sean Nesselrode faithfully live-streamed our services every Sunday.

We, the staff and vestry, became a formidable team. Barbara Thomson, and then Martha Crowell, served as Rector's Wardens—two women of deep faith, generous hearts, and decades

of experience in the parish. They were blessings beyond measure as we faced our share of tense moments and challenging issues.

My point is not that it was hard, but that we did it, ‘We work together’ are the prophetic words of our sexton, James Kent. I think the staff would agree that if we had a dollar for every time James said them, the sanctuary would already be air conditioned.

Led by the boundless talent of Tyrone Whiting, our choir opened the heavens Sunday after Sunday. Despite the issues we were grinding through as a parish, the choir propelled us into the week ahead, reminding us we were doing it for the love of Christ and the glory of God. Two of the shining moments Tyrone and I created together were the All Souls Fauré Concert last November, and Bishop Gene Robinson’s celebration last June for Pride Evensong.

Ty also created our robust choristers’ program that in less than three years has grown from 4 choristers to now 12. He hired the talented Brooke Witherite to help lead it and Julia Finnegan, who chooses and plays the music at our children and families’ service is another of Tyrone’s great hires.

What often exhilarated me was also what exhausted me. When the 4th Sunday of Advent collided with Christmas Eve, I remember the challenge of preaching 3 different sermons in 24 hours. And the nine services of Holy Week culminating in Easter Sunday are when exhaustion is transformed into triumph, the triumph of the resurrection.

This is not a tribute to me but to the power of the Holy Spirit. I believe that in those moments here when the whole is greater than the sum of its parts it’s because the Holy Spirit working among and through us.

We—and I cannot emphasize that enough—achieved a tremendous amount. The vestry supported me in my determination to hire a priest for children, youth, and families *before* and not after, our new rector arrived which is how the dedicated Rev. Luke Selles, came to St. Martin’s and began to build on the program we’d kept alive.

Wednesday night Supper and Adult Forums were revitalized, retreats at Holy Cross continued, and the Wednesday Eucharist service returned for the first time since Covid. New Lenten programming was created—including the spiritual journey bagel breakfasts and this year, a Lenten grief group that continued until Labor Day. Some parishioners who had left the church returned. New came. Babies were baptized, marriages celebrated, and parishioners, buried. The Bishop was here to welcome new members into our parish

A parishioner and vestry member who's been here for decades said, "The difference you have made here can be found in the spirit that's present now when we pass the peace."

What seemed lost was found. Not because of me, but because of we. Together we breathed new life into Christ's resurrected light. May it always lead you forward and be a blessing to our beleaguered world. When times are hard, it can feel like it's not enough, but then, you realize it's everything and where deep exhilaration abides. AMEN