

Feast of S. Christopher (transferred). July 23, 2017.

Last Sunday we held a parish workday and a couple dedicated parishioners decided to get to the bottom of our china situation. A few of you may be surprised to hear that we have a china situation, but we do, in terms of course of plates, saucers, tea cups, and the like, rather than ecumenical or international relations. And so a teenager was dispatched to crawl to the back of the cabinets, almost behind the refrigerator, to retrieve all of the pieces of china that we had, in our wisdom, stored away. Elijah returned safely from this excursion and it turns out that not only do we have a china situation, but boy howdy do we ever have a china situation. In fact, we have one hundred and nine complete seven-piece table settings, with plenty of spare pieces lying around. Just to be clear, that means that we could seat 109 people for dinner, each of whom would have seven matching things in front of them designed to hold food, before we even get to silverware.

What really caught my attention about this, besides the dutiful work of those parishioners who are sorting through it, is what it tells us about ourselves. Because there was a time in our life together as a church when it was totally reasonable to have fancy table settings for 109 people—and probably more if I'm right that the spare pieces can best be explained by plates and such breaking over time, leaving an army of tea cups and saucers orphaned, once complete table settings now scattered among the cupboards. I don't for a moment criticize this time in our history. I have no doubt that in context this was a deeply faithful period in our church's life. But now, this china's primary use is not for very large fancy dinners—its most common use is to serve dinner to our guests in the PADS emergency shelter program. And it's hard to imagine a normal thing that we might do now that would make so many seven-piece table settings seem natural.

I'm thinking especially about the fate of this symbol of who we once were because today we are celebrating the Feast Day of our patron saint, Christopher. It is a particularly appropriate day to think about who we are as a church and to celebrate the work that God has done for and through us here. And if the china settings are a partial symbol for a way that we once were, then what symbol might indicate who we are today?

The legend of St. Christopher goes that he was a very large man who went through a kind of search for the greatest king to serve and ended up settling on Jesus. He trained with a hermit who encouraged him to fast, but this proved difficult for a person of his stature. So the not-yet-sainted Christopher stationed himself by a treacherous river ford, to help at-risk travelers across, for the glory of Christ. He does this for a while and one day a little boy comes and asks for help across the river. Christopher obligingly pops the kid up on his should and starts across the river. As they make their way across, the waters rise and the little boy becomes impossibly heavy. Christopher barely gets him across and then mentions that the kid was a lot heavier than he looked. And the kid responds: "I'm Jesus, and when you carried me you carried the weight of the world." Christopher spends the rest of his life encouraging persecuted Christians until he himself

is martyred. The name “Christopher” means “Christ-bearer” and our saint earned the name by taking Jesus across the river.

The prototypical image of St. Christopher is a tall, strong man striding across turbulent waters, with a holy-looking toddler perched on his shoulder. I hope that the symbol of one who bears Christ is always appropriate for any church, but this typical image of our patron saint seems especially appropriate for what we are doing these days. Or at least, the image of turbulent waters is painfully poignant in our bewildering, uneasy times. You can perhaps pick your own worries to be represented by turbulent waters, but I think especially of the way in which we all have lost trust in institutions on which many of us once relied. I think of wars and rumors of wars. And I think of the unrelenting violence in our cities and homes. I’m wagering that although many of us have different reads on what is wrong in what places, none of us thinks that our culture is currently sailing along on smooth seas.

Crucially, St. Christopher is always pictured *in* the waters, in the thick of it, not shunning the mess and danger of the world but plunging in with eyes open—a firm grip on Jesus and an awareness, but not fear, of the risks of getting wet. Or in Matthew’s very different imagery: sheep among wolves, as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves. The image of St. Christopher in the waters calls us to get down into the danger and turmoil, bearing to a drowning world the peace, mercy, and justice of Christ. We do not stand apart on the riverbank, keeping our feet dry and waiting to see which direction the tide will turn. We plunge in, taking the greatest risks, because people are drowning and we have been found by salvation.

Now, we may be willing to follow our patron saint into the waters, bearing Christ among the chaos, but most of us lack the saint’s sure step, the certainty that whatever storm comes and whatever burden we take up, we’ll be able to get to the other side. And that is why we go in together. We are not a collection of hermits, but a community, forged into one people by and around God and the story of Jesus. We watch each others’ step, catch each other when we slip, help each other see dangers, missteps, and needs that we might otherwise miss. We share our gifts with each other in our shared work for God. This image of Christopher in the water works not by each of us imagining ourselves as a brawny heroic martyr in training, but by all of us doing the work together. We together are the people of St. Christopher’s, bearing Christ out into the hurly burly world to tell others of the great hope that is saving us. It is a privilege to do this work with you. Amen.