

**The Rev. Dr. Jan C. Heller**  
**Year C, Proper 23: 9 October 2106**  
**Saint Barnabas Episcopal Church, Bainbridge Island, WA**

In 2001, I flew to Brisbane, Australia, to give a presentation at an academic conference. It went pretty well, I thought, but a couple of days later I was giving another presentation to a group of medical students when I stopped in the middle of a sentence and suddenly realized I had no idea what I was saying. My jet lag had finally kicked in, and it took me a few moments to recover. Later, when I apologized to my host, she tacitly agreed that I may have been a bit incoherent at points, although she thought I had at least kept the interest of the medical students—which, I later learned, was no small accomplishment. In any case, if you don't know it already, Linda and I returned just over a week ago from a wonderful, if exhausting, trip to China and I have been in a bit of a mental fog since then. My hope is that I can be somewhat coherent this morning, or, if not completely coherent, at least keep you interested.

Before I begin, however, I wish to bring you warm greetings from Dennis and Grace who, along with David and Pat O'Morchoe, are also recovering from the same trip. It seems clear that Dennis and Grace are doing well, even while they are adjusting to life after Saint Barnabas, and that they appreciate our continuing prayers and support. However, let me also mention one thing that you may not know—they are happy to receive invitations and contacts from us, but as part of the separation agreement that Rectors make with their former parishes Dennis cannot initiate a contact himself. So, if we don't hear from them, it's not because they don't wish to make contact, it's because we must take the initiative.

Now to my sermon this morning. Actually, since this is my first time to address you as a congregation since Dennis retired, I won't be giving a sermon as such. Rather, I want to use this time to talk with you about what you can expect from me as your interim priest. We've been in our interim period for over a month now, and much has already been put in place and communicated to us by Virginia Walker, our Senior Warden, and the Vestry, but some of these things can't be said too often. So, at the risk of being redundant, I wish to clarify a few things for us that, I hope, will be helpful.

First, a few words about church titles. Clergy sometimes joke (usually among themselves) that the church gives out bigger titles in place of bigger salaries. Be that as it may, the church also uses titles to signal very specific things, but in ways that may not be obvious to most of us. Rectors, together with Vestries, are in charge of parishes. They enjoy a good deal of autonomy in their decision making, are hired with immediate tenure, and the relationship can't be dissolved except for cause. It takes a three-way agreement to establish or dissolve a relationship between a rector and a parish—the rector him- or herself, the vestry, and the bishop of the diocese all need to concur. During an interim period, by canon law the Diocesan Bishop automatically becomes the Rector of a parish. And, just as a bishop appoints a Vicar to serve in his or her place in a mission church, so a bishop, along with the vestry, authorizes the appointment of the interim priest or, alternatively, a priest in charge during the interim period. Interim priests and priests in charge serve at the pleasure of the bishop and the vestry; we enjoy no tenure. But there is at least one big difference between an interim and a priest in charge—an interim priest cannot be considered for the Rector's open position, whereas a priest in charge may be considered. The

bottom line for us is, as your interim priest, I won't be a candidate for the Rector's position. I've already been asked this question, and it is a perfectly normal question to ask, but it has already been answered once and for all by the very nature of position itself. I won't be a candidate for the rector's position. Period. End of story. And trust me, I wouldn't have it any other way.

Second, as an interim priest, I am very constrained in the range of my decision making authority. My primary role is to provide liturgical leadership and pastoral care during the search for a new rector. The many other decisions a rector might normally make concerning staff, finances, and property, are now being made by the Senior Warden and Vestry, with the Bishop's oversight. I may be invited to advise on these concerns, but I won't have decision making authority. Again, this is fine with me—it frees me up to be a priest in ways I most enjoy being a priest. But for you, as parishioners, it may slow things down somewhat—I may defer to others questions or concerns that you may have typically brought to Dennis as Rector.

Third, I want to talk a bit about change. I'm sure we all realize that change is the one thing that doesn't change—it is inevitable. And we will face changes during this interim period—we've seen some already just as a result of having different personalities leading services and making decisions. Moreover, sometimes interim priests are tasked explicitly in their contracts to initiate certain cultural or programmatic changes in parishes. This is *not* the case in my contract. The Vestry rightly believes that Dennis' leadership has left Saint Barnabas a much more healthy and confident parish than he found it, and that what needs to be done going forward is to consolidate and build on that health and confidence rather than initiate many new and unneeded changes just for sake of doing

something different. This seems very wise to me, as well. So, I'm not saying we won't see any changes, but I am telling you that I don't have a mandate to initiate change. This may relieve some of us who like things the way they are and it may worry others who might be looking for some specific changes during the interim period. Come to me if you're concerned to see changes liturgically or pastorally—the church has processes in place to consider such questions. If you have concerns outside the liturgy or pastoral care, please bring them to the Senior Warden and the Vestry. It's better to surface these concerns than to bury them, so we invite your input.

Fourth, related to my serving in this position, I want to disclose a conflict of interest. As your interim priest I am not the neutral observer of the call process you might have gotten if you had called a priest from outside the parish. I love this parish and, like all of you, I care very much what happens in the search for a new rector and during the interim. However, priests are not members of parishes; technically, we are members of the diocese. So, as a priest, I have never voted at the church's annual meetings or run for an office in this or any parish, and I won't have a role in the calling of the new rector—both because I'm not a member of this parish and because I'm now your interim priest. But, because I care very much about the process and the outcome, I'm still conflicted. Nevertheless, no matter how much I care, I won't be involved in calling the new rector—I will hold myself back, and I'm disclosing this conflict so that you can help me honor this promise. Also, the search committee will not share any confidential information with me about particular persons they're interviewing. I am simply, and properly, being kept out of this loop. If you talk to me about your hopes and fears related to the search, I'll consider that as part of my pastoral care responsibilities. But, if you

talk to me about potential or actual candidates, I will refer you to the search committee. In the end, I will, just as we all must, trust the process and the Holy Spirit to lead us to the right person. I will pray and hope for this person to be found and called, but that will be the extent of my involvement.

Finally, when I think of interim ministry I think of John the Baptist. I don't want to sound overly pious or overly dramatic, but over time my role must decrease while the role of the new rector must increase. Like John, I am not "the one" we're searching for, but I am here to help prepare for the person who *is*. I see my job during this interim as basically one that helps free each of you to do your jobs—both the ongoing ministries you're already doing and the added important work of calling a new rector. We, together, with God's help and guidance, can do these ministries. For now, this is our joint calling, our joint vocation, and I very much look forward to sharing this interim period with you. Amen.