

# Joy, gratitude, and the challenge of farewell



**The Rev. Becky Jones**

Like so many of life's most important conversations, this one spilled out over coffee. It was early February of 2014, and I was sitting in Pablo's with my good friend and clergy colleague, Ruth Woodliff-Stanley. I had something I wanted to ask her, but it was awkward.

At that point, I was only a couple of months into my official discernment process for the priesthood – though in truth, it was a call I had been discerning and ignoring for many years. I thought it was way too early to begin talking about where I might go to serve as curate, should I, in fact, ever be ordained a priest. But my boss didn't think it was too early. My boss was the Rev. Canon Carl Andrews, Canon to the Ordinary. Carl was also the bishop's coordinator for disaster preparedness. He never thought it was too early to start preparing for anything. He urged me to think long and hard about it, and to start taking those initial steps as soon as possible, even before I knew what the outcome of my discernment process would be.

"Well," I admitted to him, "I did have an idea..." Catherine Volland is one of my best friends. We'd gone through seminary together. I'd been going to her house for dinner and House Mass every Monday night for seven or eight years. I anguished with her over the difficulties she faced in the church as a partnered lesbian, and I delighted in the stories she told about how her priesthood had blossomed at St. Thomas. The parish took a chance on her when few others would. And oh, how she loved the place! Like many, I rejoiced when she got the call to serve as rector of St. Bede's in Santa Fe, but I sure hated to see her go. Now she'd been gone for two months, and just maybe, I reasoned, if her position were still open if and when I became a priest, I might be a good fit for it. But I figured it was still much too soon to even raise that possibility. Carl, however, disagreed. "Call Ruth," he said, "and don't wait."

So I did. Over coffee that morning, I told her that after years of serving as a vocational deacon, I'd finally found the courage to explore the possibility of the priesthood. I told her I knew curate positions were rare in Colorado, and that there was a good chance I'd have to leave the diocese to find my first job, but since St. Thomas had found a way to give Catherine her start, maybe ... well, um ... I know this sounds presumptuous on my part, but ... was there a chance

... did she think ... you know, Carl said I should ask ...

As I stammered, trying to find the words, Ruth peered over the top of her glasses at me and said at last, "Can you start tomorrow?"

In fact, it was 13 months later that I started, during Holy Week of 2015. My ordination to the priesthood was still more than two months away, but Ruth thought I could begin getting to know the parish.

What a joyous time I've had serving the people of St. Thomas. As with Catherine before me, you took a chance on me, a non-traditional curate who came to the priesthood rather late in life, and you loved me and shaped me into the kind of priest that some other parish might want to call. Just as that morning in the coffee shop with Ruth, you never once appeared to doubt my abilities, or wonder whether someone else might really be better, or whether bringing me on was just too costly. You just found a way to make it work. And I am profoundly grateful.

And now that thing that always seemed like such a far-off possibility has finally come to pass: I have been called to be priest-in-charge at St. James Episcopal Church in Wheat Ridge, beginning Oct. 1. St. James is a small parish, and it can't afford a full-time priest, so I'm thrilled that I can continue to serve at St. Thomas one-quarter time, doing pastoral care and communications and things that don't require my presence on Sunday morning. This will continue at least until a new rector is called.

I know that in time I will come to love the people of my new parish as much as I love you. But it is so very hard to leave. You all were there for me just when I needed you. You overlooked my beginner's hiccups, praised me much more than I deserved, and if there were criticisms, I never heard them. You made me feel right at home from the moment I walked in the door. You let me be the priest I always wanted to be. You let me be YOUR priest.

Thank you, dear people of St. Thomas. May God continue to richly bless this parish. And somewhere out there, there is one lucky priest who is going to come here and find what I found: a place of welcome and peace, a place for the fearful to find courage, a place for the late bloomer to blossom, a place of dreams and comfort and faith. A home. A family. St. Thomas.

Sincerely,

Becky +