

To the Congregation and Choir of St. John's Episcopal Church

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I wanted to just say a few words about the Choral Scholar Program here at St. John's, it being the choir's last Sunday, one of Mary Lou's last services, and my final day of having to provide another explanation for showing up five but no more than ten minutes late for choir practice.

It's hard to believe that when I started singing with you I was just eighteen. Some five years later, I think this place has finally started to grow on me.

The years I spent at CMU have been years that I have remained anchored by this congregation. St. John's has not only been one of the most stable parts of my student life, but has also become an important part of my identity as a human being.

When I left CMU for a short time to study overseas in South Korea, the choir remained a constant source of support. I was in closer contact with the choir while abroad than I was with my own family, and I'll never forget the words of encouragement and excitement they shared with me when I found my birth mother, nor the welcome they gave me when I returned home.

The choir and congregation have remained faithful fans of ours at all CMU events, even the ones we are not so proud of. Many of you have fed and housed us and especially myself, as I seem to have formed a habit of seeking out food and then shelter on more than one occasion. Too many of you have opened your homes and offered thoughtful words of comfort during those trying times in our lives that sometimes go unnoticed, even by ourselves.

Food, shelter, and clothing have come to us not just in raw materials, but also in generous monetary units. Our magnanimous choir cherub, Mary Ellen Blackburn, has claimed us as her own in her unfailing support of the program. Others have also given generously...funds that provide us with the means to perform essential tasks in our daily lives...acts of generosity that we will not soon forget.

Amongst the many things that I've learned here at St. John's, the least of them being: how to respond to emails as rapidly as possible, how to line up properly and still get it wrong (so sorry David), that every event deserves a glass, or two, or four, of cream sherry, and that no part of our choir vestments are or have ever been known as Vesticles...I've learned a little bit about how to be giving and how to be kind.

It is my hope that in the future we can be as generous as you all have been.

That's why we (Kathryn, Katie, Zachary, and I) have decided to purchase a piece of art, or rather a print, that would capture the message of this congregation and our deep affection for you. This decision was not without some argument, however. I, myself, being a strong supporter of coming to a democratic decision, saw to it that my opinion mattered more than theirs.

The piece that *we* chose is a print of Rembrandt's 1669 "Return of the Prodigal Son." There are many reasons why we came to this decision, one being, that Rembrandt's body of work has a strong democratic, Protestant tenor (a little joke). It is not a devotional piece meant to stir the viscera into emotional fits, but presents a Biblical narrative in human terms and not through lofty theology. The striking physical honesty of the prodigal son is so moving, having spent his entire inheritance and forced to find work feeding pigs. Yet, the motion of the painting is inward and not outward.

To the four of us, this piece emphasizes the lesson of mercy and human interaction over heavy, easily misunderstood religious dogma. Most importantly, this work embodies for us the message of welcome that this church has extended toward us.

Because the story of the “Prodigal Son” discusses the conditions of youth and thus implies a passage of time, one of mistake, error, loss, and finally redemption, we feel strongly that it speaks to our emotional and spiritual birth within this community. Our religious dispositions could not have been more varied when we began singing with you: Kathryn was summoned from a Southern Baptist background, Zachary hails from the Missouri Senate Lutherans, and Katie and I come from strong Roman Catholic families...despite our difference, I think the four of us can agree that the welcome that we have experienced here at St. John’s is truly something remarkable, flush with compassion, reason, and generosity: an image closely mirrored in Rembrandt’s masterpiece.

The choral scholar way of doing things means that this has not yet arrived by poste. But we hope that once this has found an appropriate location within the doors of this church, it will remind you of the great favor you have shown us and how truly grateful we are that you are a part of our lives. We thank you all so very much.

Patrick Bonczyk

23 May 2010