

June 28, 2026 – The Fifth Sunday After Pentecost – Fr. John Warfel

After having served five years at Christ Church, Las Vegas

It was time for a change

So in the fall of 1997

Three members of a Search Committee from Grace Church in Middletown NY-
flew to Las Vegas to interview me and to attend a Sunday Eucharist

Search Committees try to blend in with the congregation

A little bit like spies, they come to hear a candidate preach and preside-

Without tipping off anyone that their priest is considering a new position

It's a delicate situation for everyone to be sure

Therefore, my initial meeting with the Search Committee couldn't be at the
church

So we arranged to meet in the lobby of the MGM Grand Hotel in Las Vegas

I had no idea what they looked like

All I knew was their names, Carla, Peggy and Tom

They didn't know what I looked like either

But in the bustling lobby of what was then the world's largest hotel,

I was the only one in a clerical collar

I was easy to pick out; they were not.

At any moment, I was prepared for a group of three strangers to approach me.

Groups of three would smile at me,

Or at least smile at the collar, but then pass on by

Nope, not them. Not them either

The absurdity of the situation made me grin

What a strange life you live, Warfel, I thought

as I stood up straight, assuming a nonchalant, clerical pose,
whatever that was supposed to look like

With no other groups of three within sight, I began to relax

Then to my left an unfamiliar voice inquired, *Fr. John?*

I'm Carla. This is Peggy.

*Tom's still up in his room. I'll go call him.
Pretty sneaky, huh?*

*Whoever welcomes you welcomes me,
And whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me*

*I needn't have worried,
Once we left the craziness and cacophony of the casino
I felt incredibly welcomed, and apparently, so did they.*

*We spent most of that day together and we covered a lot of ground.
One thing was certain, I liked them
I liked them a lot
And they liked me, I could tell
As we talked more and more about Grace Church
I began to get excited about the prospect of becoming their new rector.*

*So, tell me about some of the quirks of Grace Church, I playfully suggested
Peggy was the first to take the bait.
Well... there's Joseph*

*Joseph is a street person,
He blesses people with an artificial Easter lily tied to a staff
We're not sure what language he speaks,
Some Eastern European dialect perhaps
And he wears the same heavy trench coat year 'round.*

*He's big, intimidating and he always comes to church late
Regardless of whatever is happening at lectern, pulpit or altar
Joseph walks up to the communion rail, kneels and prays;
He's easily agitated,
especially when clocks are set ahead or behind one hour.*

*The whole town knows him,
He stands outside city hall and blesses cars as they drive by
He used to go to the synagogue too, but they've kicked him out
But Joseph is harmless and more to the point, Joseph is one of us.*

Suddenly, becoming the rector of Grace Church seemed a little less attractive
I was impressed by their unconditional inclusivity
But I confess, I was unnerved by the daunting, troublesome Joseph.

*What if he disrupts a sermon,
Or creates a ruckus during the Consecration, I wondered*
My greatest apprehension was his effect on the newcomers I hoped to attract
Especially families with young children.

Turns out Joseph taught this well-meaning by naïve young priest quite a lot
And during my 18-year tenure in Middletown, so did Grace Church
In his famous monastic Rule,
St. Benedict instructs his monks thus:
Let all guests who arrive be received like Christ.
Here was my chance.

Despite his size, Joseph was a gentle man
Because of the language barrier,
I never had a real conversation with him
He communicated his needs and occasional agitation with gestures
But he wasn't really much trouble
And like everyone else, I got used to him being around.

At least until Bea Schettini's funeral.
In the middle of the Mass, Joseph came in from the street
(the opened door caught his attention)
And he walked directly up to Bea's casket

Immediately he began blessing it with his ever-present lilled staff
I held my breath as the family watched Joseph circle the casket,
Walk to the communion rail and kneel down

My first thought: *How embarrassing for the family*
But then I remembered what a lovely and accepting lady Bea was

Suddenly, I realized that Joseph's quirky blessing had, in fact, honored Bea;
That her soul was pleased and touched by the gesture

Jospeph, Bea and the people and parish of Grace Church-
Had just taught me an invaluable lesson;
Jospeh's *little disruption* was not only appropriate,
it was welcomed

Years later when Joseph died,
The county buried him in an unmarked grave
When Grace Church found out about it
They started a fund for a headstone

On a crisp autumn day in New Yorks' beautiful Hudson Valley
We consecrated the grave and headstone with-
Holy water, incense, acolytes, crucifer, the whole nine yards
In spirit, Bea was among us blessing the grave,
returning the favor that Jospeh had bestowed on her.

The Episcopal Church Welcomes You;
do you remember those ubiquitous signs?
One of them used to stand at the corner of Jacaranda and Center Rd.
That's how I discovered Good Shepherd back in 1999

Unlike Grace Church, Middletown, Good Shepherd is not an urban parish
We are planted in a completely different field,
We have no Josephs among our ranks
Although I have no doubt that we would be given the grace-
To rise to the occasion if we did.

More and more
In a world ripe with angry division, hopelessness,
Lack of purpose and identity:
People yearn for connection,
Connection with each other and connection with God.

How often do we hear, "*I'm spiritual, but I'm not religious*"
I don't subscribe to any creed or church
But I know deep down, I am more than just a body
That there is a spiritual element to my being

*We aren't human beings having a spiritual experience;
We are spiritual beings having a human experience.*

There are souls out there who are seeking a community like ours
They are alienated from the faith communities of their childhood
Or they are seekers fed up with the hypocritical, conditional welcome-
Of so many churches

Even if they can't articulate what's missing in their lives.
Many yearn to become part of a faith community whose welcome is genuine;
We are a faith community united by a passion to love and be loved by God:
In our worship, in the Sacraments, in our fellowship, outreach and stewardship

We hold different political views, live different lifestyles,
We have different understandings of the Kingdom of God,
And our own unfolding participation in the Kingdom, the Flow.

But differences aren't challenges to our Call to Spread the Gospel
Differences are strengths that empower us to share The Good News
We cannot do it on our own
We dare not try to do it on our own

Because genuine welcome is God-centered, not self-centered
We are channels, participants in the Flow, vessels of the Holy
Certainly not holiness itself

*Whoever welcomes you welcomes me,
And whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me*

Unlike Las Vegas,
What happens in Good Shepherd doesn't stay in Good Shepherd.
Nor should it.