

Sermon Proper 28 Year A Annual Meeting

Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18

Psalm 90: 1-8, 12

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Matthew 25: 14-30

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November 19, 2017

The Episcopal liturgical year is drawing to a close next Sunday. This Sunday is our Annual Meeting, our time to gather as a family and look back at the year just past. How are we doing? What are our strengths? Where might we be stronger?

If we put ourselves in the gospel context, as the people of God, we realize that we are not the fearful anxious servant who was allotted only one talent as the wealthy landowner went away. We may want to debate this point but we clearly are among those who were either given 2 talents or 5 talents. A talent was a huge measure of wealth. But then investments take vision. St. John's is blessed to have people with remarkable vision.

We have been incredibly blessed. So imagine that we are the servants entrusted with the master's talents. This all sounds rather metaphorically removed. But I believe gathering on this particular Sunday, this couldn't be more appropriate. As a parish that can honestly claim to have a missional nature in our very DNA, our natural tendency is to not be fearful but rather faithful and hopeful. Investing for good returns. To be missional is to be engaged with the work that God is doing in the community around us. Mission takes us outside the church into the world outside our doors.

Today, I want to look back at the year, to see how we have done as we seek to live into our parish motto, "We live by faith, sharing Christ's love, and are a voice of hope for all."

As we studied during our mission action planning process, we learned that we are missional as we extend ourselves **out** into the community around us. But, we are also missional as we connect **within** the parish with one another as well.

So first, I want to look outside our walls. I am specifically looking at activities that were new or strengthened this past year. This is not meant to ignore many of our continuing commitments of missional engagement such as the dinners at The Gateway, the St. John's Greenhouse at Lynchburg Grows, or our work at the Yoder Center in Tinbridge Hill, Miriam's House, Bell ringing for the Salvation Army, Meals on Wheels, or a host of others. I want to call attention to involvement that is developing afresh. The activities that I am describing are all team efforts even if I am unable to list everyone involved.

Two years ago, Bill Hobbs began a ministry through Interfaith Outreach Association that has attracted many from St. John's. An offshoot of Interfaith Rebuilds the ramp ministry provides custom handicap ramps for homeowners who need them. Working out of a warehouse downtown, many assist in constructing the components and then installing the ramps. This ministry allows some who have no way of affording such ramps to remain in their homes.

Mission Trips: This summer we sent youth off on mission trips. Our middle school youth went to Salter Path, NC while our high school youth went to Holy Cross Anglican School in Belize. These trips were made possible by an extremely successful Mission Possible Dinner and Auction. They allow our youth to see the world through a different lens rather than the lens of familiarity. To develop relationships with others who live a life of abundance without the material comforts that are so much a part of our lives. Going on mission is to risk being forever changed.

Adult mission trip to Boy's Home (hold up thank you note and pictures). Ann Vest and David Bice directed and organized us. On a beautiful weekend in October over 25 of us converged on the Boy's Home of Virginia's Christmas Tree Farm in Deerfield, VA to construct a shed for wreath making, etc. We also stained the exterior siding of the gift shop and refurbished and painted the two full bathrooms inside. We hope this may be an intro to opportunities to come.

During the last school year, Pat Bradbury learned of the need for tutors at Linkhorne Elementary School. That year, six of you responded and tutored. Then this year another six have joined them making the group a dozen strong. Helping elementary students to be successful at a critical point in their development.

While tutoring these students they got to know them. They learned that many came from homes where food was not always available on the weekend. One student had eaten only olives all weekend, another had gone hungry. “What could be done?” Pat (Bradbury) wondered. It seems Linkhorne Elementary had no weekend Backpacks for Kid’s Sake program. No problem, Pat thought, the people of St. John’s will just start one. The Outreach Committee provided funds and then the Thursday morning Women’s Book Study Group fills the bags. Then another volunteer takes the bags of food to the school.

Now turn our attention inside St. John’s.

Music continues to attract children, whether through yesterday’s Pedals, Pipes and Pizza that welcomed children 8-15 to learn more about the organ or our children’s choir. A grandmother’s children’s choir story, of Helen Grace Sackett. Having two friends spend the night on Saturday and she was up and dressed while her friends were still asleep. She would not miss the opportunity for the world. The view that the children have from the choir loft is unique and inspiring. Their music in turn inspires us.

Last Fall, Betsy Worthington approached me with an idea. It seems that some younger mothers in the parish were wondering if it might be possible to resurrect the Christmas Bazaar. These mothers wondered if some of the experienced cooks might be willing to teach and train a new generation of cooks. Betsy was willing to spearhead such an effort and devote a year of planning to making it happen. And happen it did last Thursday. We had a very successful bazaar raising over \$5000 and we learned a lot. The proceeds are going to benefit children. Through the Backpacks for Kid’s Sake at Linkhorne Elementary and our Day School. Beyond the funds raised, the real success was the experience of getting together and cooking. Making new friends and reconnecting folks who hadn’t been here for a while. Community was built.

This summer we installed a new cloud based database, Realm. Realm seeks to connect us ever tighter as a community. Through Realm, you have access to the parish directory, contact information and so much more. Realm is creating new opportunities for connection.

But not all is sunshine and roses. Inevitably in parish life there are losses. The past six weeks have been particularly difficult as we have celebrated the lives of great saints who have entered the nearer presence of God. We wonder how we will go on but then if you saw the groups here this month cooking and preparing for the bazaar you would see how. By coming and pitching in, hand in hand, batter, custard and icing up to the elbows. As the spiritual goes, there's a sweet, sweet spirit in this place.

Some things that we try don't work out but there is always learning in the experience. In January 2015 we began an experiment, a worship service on Sunday evening called F@5. A creative group designed this different worship experience supported by gifted musicians. After the service we gathered for a delicious meal in the Sackett Room, an opportunity to get to know one another more deeply. As last summer arrived, it was time to put the service to rest. This was quite a loss for the faithful participants. Especially the musicians and Kim and me. Yet, there is hope for the future.

But there is something else that concerns me. When I came here in October of 2010, a low point for the economy, you showed great courage in embarking on the Centennial Capital Campaign raising \$3.5 million at a very difficult time. This meant that each year you were funding not just our annual SOM to the tune of \$850K but an additional \$5000K towards your campaign pledges. This year marks the completion of your seven year pledges of support and you have been very faithful. The Vestry will pay off the construction loan balance at the end of this year. Your work was successful, you stopped the leaks and this summer repaired the Angel window as well. Our hope was that with these pledges completed our annual pledges of support would at last increase.

But despite a committed Stewardship Committee and devoted strong campaign leadership, we don't seem to be responding like those given 2 or 5

talents. While you'll hear more at our annual meeting, here is where we stand to date. Last year, we had 314 pledges and to date we have received 287 pledges. Half have pledged the same amount as last year. 25 % have increased their pledges unfortunately 15% have had to decrease theirs. These cancel one another out. The good news is we have 19 new pledges but despite them we remain 4% behind last year's total. At best, our pledging will be even with last year. You know well that staying the same just won't do, because some costs increase each year, like health care, repairs, maintenance, insurance, utilities, etc. If we are to continue to succeed we have to invest if we hope to reap dividends from new programming, as we have this year.

What does the future hold? Well, as you and I know well, we can't count on tomorrow, but we do plan and look forward. And I am aware of some very exciting possibilities.

Outside the parish: Next summer our annual mission trip for middle school youth to Salter Path, NC. And the every two year pilgrimage to Nightwatch at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in NYC on March 16, 17.

Senior High, Sarah Lusk, our talented and gifted Assistant for Children's and Youth Ministry is investigating a trip potentially to respond to the destruction wrought by Hurricane Harvey in Texas.

Others are looking into a possible Adult mission trip. There is the summer choir residency in England which we offer us numerous services of choral evensong this spring.

What about inside the parish? Worship: following upon our experience with F@5 there is a dream and vision to begin a quarterly Sunday evening service once again. If you are interested in this creative effort please speak with Kim Glenn or me.

I experience the Holy Spirit at work in us leading into paths of discovery and relationship. As we continue to form and send disciples of Jesus Christ out into the world. In missional engagement with the community around us, we are actively participating in bringing in the reign of God.

The need is great and the time is now and you are the disciples that Jesus has called forth for the mission. May God bless us all in the year ahead as we continue to join the work of God and follow Jesus.