

Sermon/Annual Meeting Report January 29, 2012

Please turn to page 817 in The Book of Common Prayer and pray with me prayer number 11, *For the Parish*

Almighty and ever living God, ruler of all things in heaven and on earth, hear our prayers for this parish family. Strengthen the faithful, arouse the careless, and restore the penitent. Grant us all things necessary for our common life, and bring us all to be of one heart and mind within your holy church; through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Today our parish we will gather for our Annual Meeting. In our church, this meeting gives all an opportunity to hear, be heard and to participate in our common life. Those of us who came from other traditions before arriving here can attest to the blessings of this type of decision-making. We should not take this kind of openness or participatory church life for granted.

As your priest, it's my responsibility to offer you a report at this Annual meeting time to share with you the gifts, blessings, challenges and promptings of the Holy Spirit in our midst as I have come to see and experience them in the past year. It is also my job to share with you what I envision for the coming year. There will be a pot-luck meal today starting at 11:15. The meeting itself will start at 11:45. All are welcome. Again this year, I'd like to frame my report in the context of today's scripture readings, rather than deliver a report in the meeting to follow later today.

In our first reading today from Deuteronomy, Moses is assuring the people that God will raise up for them competent leadership as they prepare to make their journey of faith without him. They had followed Moses into freedom and new beginnings and now they were faced with the prospect of change. Moses is assuring them that another prophet will be raised up by God from within the community. It is time, he saying, to be open to the new thing that God is doing and will do in the life of the community.

These are also good words for us to reflect on this morning. Our belief is that in the Body of Christ we are in this together. At St. Mary's we have learned over time to be open to change, new beginnings, the twists and turns of discipleship and the myriad ways that God leads us and wishes to work in and through us. It has been and continues to be a pretty amazing journey! The journey has been and continues to be blessed by outstanding leadership from the members of this parish. Like Moses assuring the people of Israel that God would continue to raise up leaders from among them to help guide and strengthen them, we have been so blessed in this parish with leaders who have helped to guide, nurture and care for the vision and ministry of this parish community. Some of our veteran (I won't say "older") members can look back to times when the leaders in this parish literally kept things running and kept the lights on.

Over the years, this dynamic has remained. Creative, imaginative leaders continue to be raised up among us and we are so blessed by their willingness to share enthusiasm, new ideas and a willingness to take ownership and responsibility for the life of this faith community. That spirit of ownership and responsibility for this parish seems woven into the DNA of this faith community. This is a gift of the Holy Spirit. We inherited, from those who have gone before us, the legacy of a faith community that is strong, independent and radically hospitable, with members that have risen to the occasion time and again to lead this community into new areas of ministry.

That leadership is expressed here in a variety of ways that help to make us the Body of Christ on this corner. Our parish ministry committees each in their area of responsibility, do an amazing job of working, planning, energizing, educating, challenging, connecting, teaching, advocating, inviting, publicizing, celebrating, worshipping, singing, proclaiming, serving, learning, encouraging and praying.

I reflect on all of the behind-the-scenes leadership exercised here: the love and care given to our two beautiful church buildings, grounds lovingly tended, fellowship hours marked by warmth, laughter and time to get to know one another, literature assembled for visitors and new members, storage areas cleaned and organized... again and again; maintenance, cleaning and repair projects taken care of by members of our parish and done with love and humility; members quietly pointing out a page number or handing a bulletin to a visitor or someone who arrives late, decorations put up and taken down, prayers offered for those who are sick and hurting, a touch on the arm, a whispered assurance of, "I'm praying for you"... are all expressions of solid, caring leadership based in the love of Jesus.

We also look to the hard work and, again, leadership, that goes into the wonderful annual events that have become a tradition not only for our parish but for the broader community: The Giant Used Book Sale, Strawberry Fest, Fall Fest, the Holiday Craft Fair and periodic events such as silent auctions and rummage sales, and we give thanks. These large events not only help to bring in much-needed funds for our parish ministries and outreach projects, but they also serve to teach people about our parish and give us a chance to invite them to join us.

From our second reading today, taken from the First Letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians, the members of that First Century Church are challenged to not worship idols and to give good example. In today's culture, we are well aware of the idols in our midst. We are also cognizant of the challenge to not only speak about our faith in our worship or in what we say, but to also put that faith to very concrete, real and living action.

In terms of giving good example, we seek to live our faith through a very clear and pronounced emphasis on reaching out to and serving those who are poor physically, spiritually and socially. This is foundational to the life we share. In 19 years of parish ministry, St. Mary's is the only parish I've encountered that, rather than using the large collections that come at Christmas and Easter (these are often counted on to help with the budget) for parish needs, gives away the money from these offerings! It is an expression, I believe, of our desire to humbly share with others in a spirit of justice and compassion.

When we think about the idols we seek to confront and overthrow in our communal and individual lives, we offer a vision of Christian living in the midst of a culture that often praises the one who gets to the top by any means necessary. We encourage loving service to others in a spirit of respect and humility. While we are told that our salary, wealth and possessions are the measure of success, we seek to give back to God and God's work a portion of all we have, because we recognize that it all comes from him to begin with.

We recognize that we don't have all the answers, that we need help, and that we need the support of a loving God and a community of faith. This flies in the face of the self-sufficiency that is so often extolled today. At St. Mary's we recognize that there are no self-made men or women. Rather, we acknowledge we are created in love by God and are called by God to be less filled with ourselves and more filled with God's love and grace so that we can more effectively follow Him and do His will.

In our gospel today, we see the beginning of the ministry of Jesus. The more signs and wonders he offers as evidence that God is doing something new, the more he confronted the presence of evil in its many guises. And, the more he proclaimed the gift of God's salvation available for all people, the more people sought him out. And we seek him still. And, many who are seeking to know him more deeply include participation in the life of this parish in that search and on that journey of faith.

You may wonder how St. Mary's fits into the larger picture of the Episcopal Church. The average Sunday attendance at an Episcopal Church in the United States, according to *The Episcopal Handbook*, is 169. In 2011, our weekly Sunday attendance was 113. When I arrived in 2003, our weekly attendance hovered at around 42. The average Episcopal Church has about 300 members. We have around 215. In 2003, we had around 60 members. Since 2003 we have grown to be the tenth largest Episcopal congregation in the Diocese of Milwaukee.

Our parish continues to steadily grow: families, single people, young, old and everyone in between have been joining our community. We are a healthy and vibrant community of faith. In anticipation of the upcoming visit by our bishop on February 12th, six teens in the parish have completed preparation for confirmation. Twelve adults recently completed, through a group process or by meeting with me individually, a process of education called *Episcopal 101*. Several of these adult members will be confirmed or, if they have been confirmed already, received into the Episcopal Church by our bishop on February 12th.

As I noted at last year's annual meeting, I feel that it's time for us to focus on the future, in two fundamental ways. First, we need to examine our mission and identity – who we are as a parish, and what we are called to do and become. I continue to be committed to that work. Last year, parish consultant Jim Gettel joined our Ministry Leaders to begin looking at this bigger picture of life at St. Mary's. This year, he will offer some education and insight to our vestry. My hope is that in the coming year we will offer some very accessible tools and processes so that parish leaders, parish ministry participants, and indeed all parishioners can add their voices, hopes and experiences as together we seek to know God's will for us on this corner. To aid in this endeavor, four of our parish members are involved in the Church Development Institute, an education and leadership training program. The skills and gifts they will gain will bless us all as we seek to shape the life of our parish in future years. Second, while this amazing building is finished, we continue to have before us the task of paying our mortgage. During this past year we began *Growing in Faith II*, a capital campaign with the goal of eliminating our debt related to the building project. The campaign was very successful, bringing in commitments of around \$360,000. I will soon be sharing exciting news about a matching grant offer from a parish family designed to help alleviate our building debt.

What happens here, ultimately, needs to connect to our whole lives. We know that it's one thing to live our faith here, and another thing altogether to live it when we pull out of the parking lot. Let us pray that our life here may form and shape all we do and say when we leave here to go back to all the mission fields to which God has called us – home, school, work, social settings, and wherever else we may find ourselves. May our loving God, who has begun so much here at this parish, through His love, bring it to completion. In the name of the Father, the Son + and the Holy Spirit. Amen.