

St. Mary's Episcopal Church  
Annual Parish Meeting & Vestry Election  
February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2020  
The Feast of the Presentation of our Lord  
Rector's Report

Good morning everyone.

The first thing I'd like to say is that I am happy to report that with this past year and continuing into this new year, we are not in a time of transition – at least not the kind that this parish has experienced in recent years. This past year in some ways was summed up by what a vestry member said at a meeting this past September. He said, 'I do want for the energy and momentum in our parish to continue, but I wish we could just enjoy a little stability for a little while!' I think that probably expressed what a lot of people were thinking.

This past year – really my first full year here – has been a chance for me to get my feet up under me and to really take the lay of the land. I'm always interested in trying to hear and understand where the hopes and longings of a parish are, to see what brings life and what doesn't, to understand where something seems hurt or injured and needs mending, and to sense where a parish is stuck and where it is free as a bird. I have a lot I still I need to learn, believe me. In some ways, I still feel like I'm really new here. But I have been here long enough to say that I think this parish is a really healthy place. We're not perfect, I'm not. But my sense is that this is a parish whose heart is in the right place. And what I mean by 'heart in the right place' means we're here to find God, to share life together in the communion of Christ, and we do want to do our part to heal this world we're all living in even if we're not always quite sure how to do that. Is that true every minutes of every day for each and every one of us. Well, no. But I think if someone asked me about St. Mary's, one of the things I'd say is its heart is in the right place. That is not a small thing.

I thought it might be good for you to know where my heart is when I think about the church and what it's called to be. I really think the church is called to be an outpost of the Kingdom of God, where God's people live out Jesus's vision of the virtues of the Kingdom: peacemaking, doing justice, showing mercy, bringing comfort, are pure of heart, and stand with the ways of Jesus even when that's crosswise with the world. It doesn't take much to get crosswise with the world these days. Our world seems to be split about 50-50 on everything. I've said more than once that if a preacher or priest really wanted to, they could run off all the Republicans or Democrats in their congregation. I have never been interested in being a part of a church that looks like that. As far as I can tell, everyone of us stands in need of the grace and mercy of God. I will always be interested in how the church can be the place where people, whoever they are, find their way to one another and see that somehow God's hand is on that.

One of the real themes that seems to have come clearly into view in this past year in our parish is how much we want to *connect*. And we want to connect on so many different levels. I've thought about this a lot over the past year. Let me share with you what I think people mean by that.

- I see a real hunger and longer for people to *connect* with the Living God within their own souls. We talk about it as ‘growing in faith’ or ‘developing a deeper spiritual life’. But I think what we want is to be connected to God. I see it, for example, when I see how interested folks are to delve deeper in Adult Forums. I think we’re hungry for that, to connect with the deep wisdom of the Christian faith and grow. I think we want St. Mary’s to be a place where we know that we are connected to God.
- I see people so hungry to *connect* with one another. I forget that our lives are all sort of far flung, even scattered, and coming here is a chance to *connect* with others in a way that shows us we are connected to something so much deeper and larger – the beloved community of Christ. I think we want St. Mary’s Church to be a place where that happens more and more.
- I see people who are wondering about how our church community can *connect* with the larger community we live in. We have our place to take and work to do that we may be a sign of Christ’s love in this sinful and broken world, and instruments of God’s healing grace in Metropolitan Richmond. I think that we want St. Mary’s Church to have a deeper connection with this work which is the mission of the church in our world.

Translating these different way the Spirit is calling us to connect will shape the decision we make about worship, formation, stewardship and outreach. But I want to say that all of these things *are already going on*, these deep connections with God and with one another are already underway, because that’s the work that the Spirit is doing right now. It’s happening as Outreach Committee members create a new vision of seeing Christ himself in the people who need us, or, children through Vacation Bible School On the Go discover a larger world and how they want to be a part of it, or in the quiet way a friend brings a neighbor to the Wednesday Eucharist who longs for healing, or at a Newcomers dinner where we share our lives with new friends and our hearts grow larger, or a new mom weeps for joy and something deeper when her baby is wrapped in a sweet blanket knitted just for her by a dear soul in our parish, or when we encourage each other to stand shoulder to shoulder in our season of Stewardship because God has been good to us and we want to say thank you, God, or we travel to Ecuador to show sweet friends there that we love them and are with them, or kids and young people and grownups young and older crowd around tables til more need to be set up for breakfast, or how in blessing our past at the Advent Festival and Lessons and Carols the future is somehow blessed as well, or as someone you’ve never seen before sits in your pew and it’s mostly ok, or all the ways that each of us is saying ‘yes’ to God. The Spirit is already at work, connecting our lives with God, with one another, and with this wide world that God loves.

I wondered last year at this meeting if St. Mary’s Church wasn’t a ‘sleeping giant’. I don’t know if that’s the right way to put it or not. What I know is that this is a parish that is already alive to the Spirit of God, and growing not just in numbers but more importantly in depth of faith, hope and love. I am so grateful to report that we are already on our way.