

Sermon 3 Epiphany Year A (Annual Meeting)
January 27, 2008
St. John's Episcopal Church
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St. John's: The Things That Matter

Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken by through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: "Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned." From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew, his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother, John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left their boat and their father, and followed him. Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.
Matthew 4:12-23

Last Sunday in a sermon honoring of legacy of Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement, I closed by saying that sometimes it's more important to fail in the things that matter than to succeed in mediocrity. Moreover, we live in a culture that would like nothing more than for us collectively to agree to pursue success in trivial things and avoid the risk of failing in the things that matter most. At the end of the 9 o'clock service, Bill Peterson approached me and said, "Your next sermon needs to be about the things that matter." As soon as he said it, I knew that Bill had given me my task for today. For today, on the occasion of St. John's Annual Meeting, we take stock of the identity, purpose, and mission of our congregation, looking back on the past year and casting our collective gaze toward the future. The title of this sermon is, thanks to Bill, "St. John's: The Things that Matter."

Most of us find our way to a church like St. John's in search of the things that matter to us. In the beginning that search is appropriately self-centered: Does the worship experience uplift me and give me food for thought for the coming week? Do I experience of something of God here? Am I welcome? Do I leave with a greater sense of peace and purpose for my life? If I come with family members or friends, do they, too, receive what they need?

It's important to ask fundamental questions about what we're looking for and what we need in a church. In his book, *The Heart of Christianity*, Marcus Borg writes, "The single most important practice is to be part of a congregation that nourishes you even as it stretches you...If you are not involved in any church or are part of one that leaves you hungry and unsatisfied, find one that nurtures and deepens your spiritual journey. Find one that makes your heart glad."¹

Part of what matters to me, as one whose job it is to think about what you, friend or stranger, long-time member or first-time visitor, experience when you walk through

¹ Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* (HarperSanFrancisco: 2003), 195.

these doors, is how we can be the kind of community that makes for glad hearts. It matters to me that you find what you need here, that St. John's be a place of respite, inspiration, and where you can give your very best to the glory of God. One of the things I love about St. John's mission statement is our commitment to a balanced Christian life. We don't favor one dimension of church over others here, but acknowledge the importance of them all.²

Striving for excellence in all areas of Christian life is no small feat, however, and in some years our learning curve is particularly steep. The actor and comedian Steve Martin has written a memoir of his life entitled, *Born Standing Up*. In it he describes how he learned the craft of stand up comedy—playing clubs across the country, developing his act, figuring out what worked, what didn't, and why. "I learned a lesson," he writes. "It was easy to be great. Every entertainer has a night when everything is clicking. These nights are accidental and statistical: like lucky cards in poker, you can count on them occurring over time. What was hard was to be *good*, consistently good, night after night, no matter the circumstances."³ The same is true of our calling as a church: it's not so much the occasional flashes of brilliance that matter, as wonderful as they are, but the steady, consistent spiritual offerings that we can count on and confidently share.

The challenge is that we're human. And we are a faith community, not a shopping mall. What we offer here is in large measure a reflection of what each of us chooses to give. God can and consistently does work miracles here in ways reminiscent of the loaves and fishes, but what we offer, and the spirit in which we offer it, directly influences the spiritual depth and predictability of our common life. God does not call us into community to be producers and consumers of religious goods and services. We are called to discipleship, the path of following Jesus. As we just heard in the story of the ones Jesus' first called to follow him, faithfulness takes us to new places *and* requires us to leave some things behind. There is a cost to this life—well worth it—but a cost nonetheless. Woe to the church that pretends it isn't so.

We are called to pattern our lives on Jesus. Such a life requires a commitment to prayer and reflection, hospitality to strangers, generosity in giving, and perhaps most important, a willingness to believe that your life matters to God. How you honor the particular struggles and pain of your history and circumstance, how you cultivate and share the gifts you have been given, what you choose to spend your time doing, matters to God. How you grow in your capacity to forgive, both others and yourself, matters to God. What gives you joy matters to God. The content of your character, the quality of your relationships, the depth of your commitments, your willingness to be present in suffering and to rejoice in another's good fortune—it all matters to God.

At St. John's we strive to think of these things. For most of us, the world is spinning so fast that we don't have time to think, much less reflect on our experiences and discern their meaning. We know that there are things about our lives and the world that aren't right, but we can't always articulate what bothers us, or worse, maybe all we

² St. John's Mission: *We celebrate the gift of Christian community and welcome all, without distinction, to share the joys and pains of life's passages. We commit ourselves to personal and spiritual maturity, both traditional and innovative worship, the healthy nurturing of children, and reaching out, beyond the church, seeking Christ in all persons.*

³ Steve Martin, *Born Standing Up: A Comic's Life* quoted in "The Road to Funny," by Alex Witchel, in *The New York Times Book Review*, November 2, 2007, 15.

can do is complain and we don't know how to change. At St. John's we create space—multiple spaces—where we can sort these things out and allow the voice of God to speak and be heard amidst the clamor of so many other voices.

Much of work at St. John's in the past few years has been the intentional cultivating of space and of our capacity to live as Christian people. Some of the work has felt, quite frankly, to be self indulgent, and we bristled at the investment we were making in ourselves when the needs of our communities and the world cried out to us. How could we justify the expense of this building, the energy spent on the inner workings of community, on sending our young people to Europe for a spiritual pilgrimage, or what it costs to hire full time staff at livable wages with health care benefits to serve us? We struggle with these things, rightfully so, for we know that God's concern isn't only the church, but the world for which Christ gave his life. How can we justify the ways we live—personally and collectively—in knowledge of the world's pain?

I almost left seminary after my first semester, 25 years ago, precisely because of this struggle. In the years between college and seminary I had dedicated my life to serving homeless families and undocumented workers along the Arizona-Mexico border. To pursue ordination, I had to leave that world and put myself in the ivory towers of a seminary. To be honest, I had reached near total burn out in my work before seminary, and I'm not sure how much longer I could have kept it up. But the isolation and seemingly endless self indulgence of seminary was killing me. A wise professor spoke to my despair: "Mariann," he said, "you can't give yourself away, if you don't have a self to give." He could see that I was running on empty, and that my capacity to give was far less than my desire. In no small measure I spent the next decade of my life in service to the self I was called to become, in order to have a self to give.

I believe the same is true for St. John's and every Episcopal congregation of this diocese. God is calling us to strengthen our identity and capacity as Christian people, to dedicate ourselves to the practices of Christian life, so that we can give more of ourselves away. The less we are, the less we can give; the more we are, the more compassionate and forgiving, joyful and committed, stronger and wiser, the more we have to give in service to God's mission of reconciliation. That's what we've been about: the building of capacity, cultivating the soil in which God's seeds can flourish, and learning what it means to serve as Jesus serves.

This is a culminating time for St. John's in many ways: the building process is mostly complete and paid for. The staff transition—a complete turnover in staff in just over a year—is also nearly finished. The dissemination of authority throughout the congregation is astonishing: the numbers of people engaged in leadership, guiding us in both discernment and action, has grown dramatically. The increased participation in small groups, organized for the purpose of faith exploration, relationships, and ministry is encouraging. The renewal of our music, and Chad Smith's passion for leading us in making joyful sound, is contagious.

About the building: it is more than we hoped for and accomplishing beyond what we dreamed it would. People use our beautiful space every day of the week. Groups from within and outside the parish constantly ask to reserve the library and parish hall. The day care has nearly doubled the number of families it serves. On Sunday mornings, as you know, we use every corner. Thanks to the generosity of many and the good stewardship of our contractors, we will owe half of the \$400,000 debt we anticipated when capital

campaign commitments end this year. This presents us with some interesting possibilities: do we stretch ourselves to pay the debt off completely, and thus remove any burden of it in future operating budgets? Do we put back on our agenda the one goal we let go of when trying keep costs under control: controlling climate and humidity in this sanctuary? It's worth our consideration, given how fluctuations in humidity and temperature adversely affect the pipe organ and grand piano, not to mention human beings.

About the staff: of the four transitions in the past 18 months, three have gone very well, to the point where we can't imagine our life without Debra Christensen in the office, Walter McKinney as our sexton, and Chad Smith as our Minister of Music. We will continue our search for our Minister for Children, Youth, and Families and find the person best suited to lead us. In the meantime we are grateful for the Rev. Michele Morgan's presence and ministry among us. We are in good hands.

The work continues. We've climbed mountains, as the Haitians say, only discover more mountains. In 2008, I see us continuing in the endeavors we've begun and trying others, unafraid to risk failure. Among those endeavors are children's choirs, small groups of families gathering regularly to share their lives and allow their children to group as friends here; youth ministry venturing out in even greater ways, pastoral care offered through intentional one-on-one relationships. There are still more Habitat for Humanity houses to build, more children to educate through our partnership in Haiti, and the on-going work of justice and peace.

St. John's is also being called into intentional partnership with others, through ISALAH, the faith-based coalition focused on public policy; through the PEACE Foundation, working in North Minneapolis to reestablish the kind of safety and sense of community that we consider normal in South Minneapolis neighborhoods; through the Haiti Partnership, a group of Episcopal churches in personal relationship with our counterparts in Haiti. There is also a growing awareness among the congregations of the Diocese that the only way to turn back the precipitous rate of decline of the Episcopal Church in our state is to work together. It makes sense that the God who sends us out into the world would call us into these partnerships. St. John's has much to offer and much to learn.

I'm not suggesting that we all need more things to do. The Christian life, first and foremost, is about receiving grace and *being* transformed, not adding a lot of busy work to our over-extended lives. But you as well as I the liberating power of an authentic call, the joy we feel when we discover the work that energizes rather than depletes us. That's what a call does for us: it makes our hearts glad.

Today we thank God for our common life, tend to the work that makes for strong community, and look to the horizon. To that end, the vestry and I ask you to consider two questions today: What about St. John's life and ministry matters most to you? What spiritual question that you hold in your heart would you like us as a community of faith to explore? For those who can't stay for the Annual Meeting, we have response sheets for you to complete. We'll have time of discussion during the Annual Meeting, and afterwards your leaders will collect all written responses and ponder them as we discern God next call to us.

Bill Peterson sent me his response to the first question this week, and in closing I share some of his thoughts with you. "What matters is work that is meaningful,

challenging and makes the world a better place; a variety of relationships that span the spectrum from serious to playful, intimate to casual, tempestuous to intellectual; belonging to a community that is worth working for; cultivating joy and wonder even when you don't feel it; at least once in your life (and hopefully only once) experiencing the loss of almost everything except your belief that, no matter what, you are a child of God.

As you add your voice, prayers, and renewed commitment to this community of faith, imagine what God can do, and is doing, in, among, and through us.

Note to readers: The vestry and I invite all to respond to these questions. Send your responses to mebudde@stjohns-mpls.org

What about St. John's life and ministry matters most to you?

What spiritual question that you hold in your heart would you like us as a faith community to explore?