

## LOVE IN ACTION

A sermon preached on Annual Meeting Sunday, February 12, 2017, The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany, (Year A), at St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in Bedford, New York  
by the Rector, The Reverend Terence L. Elsberry.

*"Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart; all else be nought to me, save that thou art – thou my best thought, by day or by night, walking or sleeping, thy presence my light."*

(The first verse of the hymn "Be thou my vision," hymn # 488, The Hymnal 1982)

### I

The words of this hymn say a lot about what has guided St. Matthew's Church in our years together. What I'm talking about is vision. Not just any vision – not mine or the vestry's – but GOD'S vision. The Bible tells us that without a vision, the people perish. What this means is that God's people need God's vision for how to proceed. We need it as individual Christians in our own lives. We need it as a church. Because God always has a vision, a plan in mind. Even the most cursory reading of the Bible – from beginning to end – shows us that from before the beginning of time God has had a plan He keeps working to reveal to His people, that He keeps patiently working to bring to fruition. Over and over you see Him calling out individuals, in both the Old Testament and the New, who will be willing to make God's dream for His people and for the world a glorious reality.

When we're willing to do that we're among the fortunate ones. Then we join the ranks of the people and churches through the ages that have been able to catch the Holy vision and make it reality. That's what we've tried to the best of our ability to do at St. Matthew's in these years since 1994.

### II

You'll notice that in your order of service you have a four-page insert.

Presented here is an overview of the work of God in and through St. Matthew's Church during nearly a quarter of a century of remarkable accomplishments. It tells the story of parishioners who have answered God's call to build, and re-build, both physically and spiritually on the foundations laid by generations of our Anglican forebears who were organized as a parish of the Church of England here in Bedford in 1694 and those who dedicated our church in 1810.

It's a twenty-plus year story of challenges met, difficulties overcome and lives changed – both within our parish family and in the world outside our doors. It's a story of men and women who have caught God's vision for our church and carried out that vision in ways that might once have seemed impossible.

I give thanks to God for His vision and to the people of St. Matthew's for making this happen.

### III

Let's take a look at this list of happenings. We won't touch on every one, you'll be happy to know. That's why you have your own copy. You can take it home and read it at your leisure – and I hope you will. But here are some high spots. I call this little thumb nail history "Love in Action," because it's God's love for us and St. Matthew's and our love for Him and this church that have spurred us on and enabled us to do so much.

You'll notice here that our first vestry retreat, and the first for St. Matthew's, was held in the spring of 1995. I told the then vestry that we needed to go away to some place where we weren't disturbed and devote a couple of days to the process of determining our vision. **TIME FOR ACTION!**

From that very first vestry retreat we came away with the expressed needs to make St. Matthew's a more open, welcoming church; begin planning for property initiatives; and grow in both numbers and pledged income. We also came up with our St. Matthew's statement of purpose, our motto as a church: **To Know Christ and to make Him known.** Everything we've done since, every major initiative we've undertaken in all these years, does one or both of these things: helps us know the Lord better and/or brings Him and His love and His caring to others.

In the fall of 1996, having formed a committee to study the will of our great benefactress Hope Bedell, we formed the Bedell Committee. In all these years since, the Committee has entertained requests for financial help – through grants to churches in our diocese (with primary attention given to our own diocesan Region Two), and to meet other especially deserving needs. One such met need was helping rebuild the Community Center building in Katonah.

Our next major initiative, and one of the most important, was our Capital Campaign launched in June, 1997, and successfully concluded that October. We raised the money to double the size of the Parish House. If you've come as a parishioner since 1999, you may not know this but we added the kitchen, Fellowship Room, handicap accessible bathrooms and reconfigured the existing space to make more offices for staff. Bishop Sisk was here on a golden Sunday morning in May to preach a sermon of celebration and be led, with all of us, by a bagpiper in procession from the Church to the new addition, which he then duly blessed.

With those capital campaign funds, we also restored the interior of the church – re-doing the walls, making the pews as straight and square as we could, and painting the interior. We also restored the exterior of the Rectory, which meant removing the siding, insulating the old house for the first time, and adding all new siding. It also meant that now when the wind blows, our dining room curtains don't also blow in the wind.

Fall, 2000. Tony Newman's concert series, formerly performed in church occasionally at four o'clock on Sunday afternoons, is given a new time: eight o'clock Wednesday evenings; a new name: Bedford Chamber Concerts, and an efficient new steering committee. What a success these concerts

have been; having (along with our Distinguished Speakers Series) the happy effect of bringing in a lot of people from the community to see what a fun, friendly, welcoming and culturally relevant place St. Matthew's is.

In May, 2002, we dedicated an addition to the Church – which included a new Altar Guild Room, Sacristy and handicap access.

In the fall of 2001, we were able to convince the Nature Conservancy to deed us the 26-acre Ketchum Preserve, named after one of our former, much-loved rectors, Arthur Ketchum. This bucolic addition, over the stream and up the hill from our original glebe land, brought our property to 66 acres.

Then came the shattering blow of 9/11. We held a service here that night. I remember preaching my shortest sermon ever. Still shocked and stunned, as we all were, all I could say was: "They may break our hearts, but they can't break our spirits."

We had a renewal of American values and meaning in the weeks after 9/11 and three groups of us volunteers made the trip down to St. Paul's Chapel to support crews working at the Twin Towers site.

In May of 2004, we dedicated the new Columbarium, beautifully designed and constructed. Another procession, another bag pipe, this time out through our spring blossoming Church Yard, made even more atmospheric by a lovely billowing mist.

Then October, 2004, and the first in our series of Bicentennial events, leading up to the re-dedication of the Church in 2010.

None of us who were here that October Sunday morning can ever forget what it was like. All of us dressed up in Federal-era clothes, with some of our number arriving by horseback or carriage; a service from the 1798 Book of Common Prayer, which would have been used at that time; and the differences between worship then and now indicated by the lack of flowers, candles, crosses, or a clergy-choir procession. I wore what my then predecessor would have worn: a plain black robe and stiffly starched linen preaching tabs. Then we lunched on food that would have been eaten at the time. Only problem: some of us got there too late for the overflow crowd and dined on mostly bread and coffee. Who cared? We were on a spiritual, historical, community of St. Matthew's high!

The other anticipatory Bicentennial events were a John Jay weekend; a weekend of offerings devoted to St. Matthew's art and architecture; an outrageously fun St. Matthew's Family Harvest fair, which meant hay rides, games, eating barbecue sitting on bales of hay, and a Bluegrass band. How do you beat it?

During a five-year span, from October, 2005 to January, 2010, St. Matthew's, led by our Bedell Committee, made an all-out effort to aid the Gulf Coast victims of Hurricane Katrina. We packed a big truck, driven by our volunteers to Mississippi, with immediately-needed supplies. For months, our

people made trips to the Gulf Coast, determining the best ways we could make a difference. We ended up re-building a new Parish House for St. Mark's Church in Gulfport, Mississippi, and a new church building for St. Mary's-by-the-Sea in Coden, Alabama. Again, for those of us involved with this effort, we made connections and had experiences none of us will ever forget.

Then came "Raise the Roof!" Another unforgettable St. Matthew's effort. We helped Antioch Baptist Church with a major expansion, then celebrated the success of the venture with a joint choir-led service here (Gospel meets Baroque!) and a jointly-cooked dinner on the grounds. Christian unity at its best!

In the fall of 2007, I formed a long-range planning committee, born of the need after so much activity, to renew and revise our vision. No major shift of course needed, just time to stand back and consider where we'd been, where we were and where the Lord wanted us to go. From the intensive work undertaken by that committee came, among other things, our five o'clock Sunday service and our St. Matthew's School. Good work!

It was on October 17, 2007, the exact date two hundred years after New York bishop Benjamin Moore consecrated the church, that our Bishop Mark Sisk re-consecrated our beloved little church.

Hurricane Sandy hit in January, 2013, and again we responded with St. Matthew's volunteers helping re-build houses and Bedell helping re-build St. John's Church on Staten Island.

On September 15, 2013, Bishop Chilton Knudsen performed the service of Dedication and Consecration of our new Children's Chapel – a gem of architectural perfection, a sweet space for Sunday morning children's worship and our Sunday evening five o'clock services. What a lovely addition to our worship life and enhancement of our beautiful property. And as virtually everyone who sees it for the first time says, "That's new? It looks like it's been here forever."

#### IV

**Now, to top off this startling array of initiatives, of all the things that can happen when a church has the talent, the commitment and both the will and the willingness to fulfill God's vision, we've completed our second capital campaign during my years here. We called this new campaign "A New Foundation for Our Next Generation."**

**I wish them well, that next generation. I hope they have as much success and as much satisfaction as we've had carrying out God's vision for St. Matthew's. I hope they touch as many, and even more lives, for good as we have. And I hope they have even half as much fun!**