

The Rev. Wayne Nicholson
St. John's Episcopal Church
28 January 2018
Epiphany IV (Mark 1:21-28), Annual Meeting

I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, *
in the assembly of the upright, in the congregation.
(*Psalm 111:1*)

And that's what we do every week. We give thanks to the Lord in the assembly of the upright, in the congregation.

Here we are, the middle of Epiphanytide, preparing hearts and minds for our Annual Parish Meeting. And here I am, in the assembly of the congregation, wondering what I could possibly say to you that a) you've not heard me say before, or b) you're hanging on my every word?

This is Annual Meeting Sunday in many congregations, and a lot of my clergy colleagues are also wondering how to encapsulate the past year – or the past decade – and look to the future of their congregations.

Ah – FaceBook to the rescue!

My dear friend and classmate Christopher asked, "Would someone be so kind to write my annual report for Sunday? Needs to be upbeat while acknowledging opportunities that face us. TIA – that's Thanks In Advance!" Ah, a FaceBook post right up my alley! And some of the responses were *so* helpful (and some... not so much).

Here's an annual report from our classmate Gretchen Rehberg, now *The Right Rev'd* Gretchen Rehberg, Bishop of Spokane: "God is love. Jesus calls us to follow him. Jesus is headed for the cross. Resurrection is real."

I like it. Pithy. Goes to the heart of the matter. Thank you, Bishop.

From Barbara, of Trinity Church, Athens, Pennsylvania: "Love good. Hate bad. Go in peace. Just sent ours for final editing. Sorry, I'm all out of words."

Well, that was honest. And brief. Love good. Hate bad. Go in peace. The end.

From Fr. John, retired from Trinity Church, Newport, Rhode Island, a suggestion with a stewardship twist: "Love each other without exception. Give more, without exception. Amen. Go in peace."

I wonder how his budget looked?

And finally, from my friend and classmate Ed, now serving the Lakota people in Pine Ridge, South Dakota, and I quote: "To paraphrase Joseph Stalin: 'We will have fewer, but more loyal Episcopalians.'"

Well, leave it to Ed to paraphrase the wicked "Uncle Joe" to express a thoughtful and short reflection.

Indeed: God is love. Jesus calls us. Love good. Hate bad. Let us go forth in peace.

No, that's not the dismissal.

It is a word of encouragement.

This parish has served our larger community so faithfully over the last, what is it, eleven years? And I believe, I truly believe, that it's not about me. It's not. I say this because during my tenure with you I have watched you bloom like a plant that was yearning to bloom but just needed some love and some encouragement – some water, some fertilizer, a bit more sunshine. The plant had good roots – excellent roots, in fact – it just wanted some tender care. Some laughter. Some music.

And voilà. You have bloomed into this amazing, wondrous body of faithful people who understand the meaning of "Love God, love your neighbor" and who are unwilling to be docile pew-sitters and who are eager to serve God by serving one another and the larger community outside those red doors.

Speaking of which... People often ask me why we have red doors.

An old and now dismissed theory was that it meant the mortgage was paid off. Um... well, if that were the case we probably should have repainted them green last year so we could repaint them red again in a few years.

Another theory has been that red indicates the presence of the Holy Spirit. Well, that's at least plausible.

But the reason I like best is that red doors in the early days of the church signified a place of safety and refuge. For example, a soldier could not pursue an enemy who had entered a church through its red doors.

Now I don't know how historically accurate this is, but I like it anyway. I appreciate this spiritual approach to a rather non-spiritual fact – I mean, a door is a door is a door – because that is how I see St. John's: A place of safety. A place of refuge. A sanctuary. A place of welcome.

But back to the annual report...

This parish will have an amazing opportunity later this year. The time will be challenging, to be sure, and there will be anxiety. But Jesus said, over and over, "Be not afraid."

And I would add, "Be excited!"

Because as sad as we will be to say our goodbyes, new doors – red doors – will open. St. John's will take time to breathe and to reflect and to pray: Where, indeed, is the Spirit leading this parish? What is the next chapter going to be like? What wants to happen?

The roots of St. John's Episcopal Church are stronger now. They are full of life. They nourish the blossoming forth of a new era. You may notice on the statistics page of the Annual Report that our average Sunday attendance has not gone up – and I have no fear about that. In a

university town like Mount Pleasant there is a transitory nature of church membership – people come, people go, people come. I think my friend Ed got it rather right.

Newcomers arrive with fresh ideas, new rays of sunshine to nourish the sturdy plant; old-timers look around and see faces they don't know – and they reach out and they tell stories that bring the newcomers into the circle.

And they tell stories that energize and inspire – the Goodrow Fund. Choral Scholars. Funerals, weddings, Baptisms. Christmas caroling. Clean and Bright. Daughters of the King. Easter Vigil. The Prayer Group. Retreat days and movie nights. Restoration House, welcoming homeless people into our sacred spaces. The Emmaus Community. Marvelous food. An exciting new building. Easter Vigil.

The story-tellers encourage newcomers to become “one of us” and then they point the way through those red doors of welcome toward the streets, where Jesus lives.

“Be not afraid.” Be *excited!* Listen: The Spirit will speak when you least expect to hear her.

And St. John's will *thrive*.

Thanks be to God.

With my whole heart, I say, “Thanks be to God.”

Amen.