

January 29, 2012

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

Psalm 111

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

MARK 1:21-28

WHERE “I” BECOMES “WE”

“There is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and *for whom we exist*, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.”

St. Paul says a lot in a short space. There is no such thing as a “self-made man” or a “self-made woman.” We human beings were all made by God and designed so that we would flourish *most* when we live *for* God.

Moses, the greatest human figure of the Hebrew Scriptures, pointed beyond himself and his time (as we heard in today’s first reading) to a prophet like himself from his own people who God’s people should obey; Christians call that person Jesus, the same person who St. Paul says was the very agent of Creation. Jesus himself is described in today’s Gospel as preaching *with authority*, not with citations from other sources like other preachers: Jesus himself was and is the authority. In Jesus’ presence people received -- and receive -- not only wisdom and inspiration but also healing, and even life itself.

To be invited into a relationship with this person, Jesus Christ, *the* authority, the source of life in the beginning, the source of life beyond this earthly life, and the source of life *right now* in our lives is awesome and humbling.

How can we respond but to join with the author of today’s psalm and say, “Hallelujah! I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, in the assembly of the upright, in the congregation.”

“*In the congregation.*” *Here*, just as much as thousands of years ago in ancient Israel when that psalm was written, *here* in this congregation is where “**I** becomes “**we**”. Each of us can say “I give thanks”, and we bring all of our thanksgivings together and become a *congregation*. And Anglican Christians have been doing that in this very spot for 270 years as of this year. Through war and peace, depressions and prosperity, colonization and independence, slavery and freedom, segregation and liberation, the life-changing, life-saving Gospel of Jesus Christ has been preached, celebrated and lived here with greatly increasing understanding of how life-changing and life-saving Christ’s Gospel is, and must be. And still, after 270 years, there is lots to do, as individuals and as a Christian community.

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Which is why today we once again gather to give thanks *in the congregation*, and *as a congregation* we have an Annual Meeting to elect officers in accordance with a democratic

process, to encourage one another, and to challenge one another to strive for *new heights as a congregation*.

I want to spend the rest of this sermon picking up on three points from my Annual Report, which is available as a part of the Parish's Annual Report, focusing right now not on the many accomplishments and thanksgivings we have for many ministries but on some challenges/opportunities for Christ Church for 2012 and beyond.

Three challenges/opportunities I want to mention are *growing this community, growing our financial stewardship, and growing our outreach*.

Whoever presides at a church worship service is required to record the attendance in the Service Record Book in the sacristy. At a regular Sunday service like this one, the ushers count everyone who is in worship and submit a detailed report on a slip of paper. Over the course of the year we get the total attendance at regular Saturday evening and Sunday services (weddings and funerals are in a separate category) which, divided by the number of Sundays, yields a number called Average Sunday Attendance. That is considered a much better gauge of the size of a church's *congregation* than how many people are officially on record as members.

For the last decade, Christ Church's Average Sunday Attendance has been around 200. In 2008 it was 213. Over the following two years, however, it dropped by 15% to 182. Attendance stabilized at that number in 2011, but only because Christmas Eve was a Saturday; without that one year quirk of the calendar, we would have had *three straight years of meaningful decline*.

This is a concern. Jesus told us to "make disciples of all nations." There are thousands of people within range of this church who are not active members of any Christian congregation, and a good many of them would tell the Gallup Poll that they are Christians. The ministries of invitation, welcome and inclusion are crucial reasons why this church has persevered for 270 years.

Especially at this time in history, we can strengthen our ministries of invitation, welcome and inclusion for *all* sorts of people, including Christians who may have been put off by past experiences of church *someplace*. For example, there are lots of women who are frustrated by the "glass ceiling" which exists for the ministries of women in *some* churches. *This church is different*. There are divorced men and divorced women who are treated as second class citizens and banned from communion in *some* churches. *This church is different*. There are people in wheelchairs or with walkers or canes who face barriers in *some* churches. *This church is different*. There are People of Color who are still given the message that they "just don't fit in", in *some* churches. *This church is different*. There are gays and lesbians who have been *thrown*

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out of some churches. *This church is different*. **Everyone is welcome here.** Can we say it together? **Everyone is welcome here.**

There are people who are hungrier to hear that and to experience that welcome than you might imagine. Let's say it loud and say it proud: **"Everyone is welcome here."**

We are looking to strengthen our ministries of invitation, welcome and inclusion with more volunteers, especially to serve as Greeters, Coffee Hour hosts and hostesses, Newcomer Buddies, members of the Evangelism and Communication Committee, and people to open the hand of fellowship *explicitly and obviously in every ministry in this church*. Talk to me or to a warden or to Marie Thompson about specifics.

Second challenge/opportunity: *growing financial stewardship*. The good news is that pledge income *rose* by 12% last year, which is truly inspirational in such challenging economic times. We have the guts to be giving people. The bad news is that nevertheless we still have an *unsustainable structural budget deficit* which is only being closed by dipping into savings every year. This is called "heating the house by burning the furniture."

It is good to have savings which we *can* use principal from to help sustain our mission and ministry during an economic calamity like the Great Recession. It is *not* good when dipping into principal becomes a habit, which it has. Contrary to some gloomy forecasts, pledging has *not* declined for 2012 during this interim period -- in fact we're projecting an increase -- but there is plenty of room for more financial pledges of any size and from any person of whatever age or circumstances. And while I'm talking about money, let me make something clear.

Christ Church is not a church of "the 1%". It probably was some points in its history, as the Parish History Task Force is learning. But not in *this* century. In 2012 we are not a church of the political and financial movers and shakers of New Brunswick. We *do* have movers and shakers in the intellectual, artistic and outreach lives of New Brunswick, all of which is wonderful. But is there anyone here named Buffet or Gates or Carnegie or Rockefeller -- or Johnson & Johnson -- who's paying the bills? No. "Elvis has left the building."

We are paying the bills. All of us. Together. Or not at all. For Christ Church to have a *sustainable* financial future will take more people to join those who have made commitments. If we pull on the oars together, the boat will move forward. Also please understand, that if someone is in financial distress, *we will carry you*. Climb in the boat, and when things change for you, pull on an oar in accordance with your ability to do so. If you're not in financial distress, your contribution makes it possible to have a wonderful banquet of activities which are *free*.

Finally, *outreach*. There is a whole lot of wonderful outreach ministry going on, as detailed in the Annual Report, and our church's pledge to our diocese supports mission and

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ministry beyond these walls in our diocese, our nation, and around the world. That said, without a *specific* mission project beyond New Brunswick which has *personal involvement* by parishioners, the concept of "global mission" is rather abstract.

I am surprised, frankly, by the absence of a *specific* mission project beyond New Brunswick supported by Christ Church because *this is a congregation with global reach*. Look

around. Start with the countries of *birth* of members of this congregation, add countries of *ancestry*, add countries that someone here has lived in or visited for a significant time, and we would have quite a list. And last November, I was very touched by the response of people to my sermon about alternative Christmas presents to groups such as Episcopal Relief and Development and Heifer International.

What if we got *specifically and personally involved* in supporting an outreach project in another country, perhaps an Episcopal Relief & Development, Heifer or Habitat project in, say, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Jamaica, Nigeria or another country we have *personal connections* with. *We are the world* here at Christ Church. How can we help to transform lives *beyond* New Jersey? Just a thought: come to Chizoba's Adult Forum next week on the Millennium Development Goals. Pray about it and maybe we can do something both new and wonderful together in another country.

Growing community, growing financial stewardship and growing outreach are all part of serving our Lord Jesus Christ in his healing of the world. These aren't my ideas; they're his. I just work for him. And so do we all.

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