

February 3, 2013

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Psalm 71:1-6

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

LUKE 4:21-30

EXCELLENCE AND CHALLENGES

Today is the day of our parish's Annual Meeting, so you might call this sermon the "State of the Parish" sermon. First, however, a word from our sponsor, the Holy Spirit, who inspired the scriptures we just heard.

First of all we heard today from the great prophet Jeremiah, who was called by God to be a prophet when he was quite young, as he says. Jeremiah *knew who was talking to him* when God spoke and became a great leader because he was raised in a *community of faith as a child*. God only knows (literally) what future leader we might have among us today -- or what *potential* leader is waiting to be invited to Sunday School or youth activities *and* church.

We heard today from St. Paul that love -- not sentimental love but powerful, self-sacrificing love, *agape* -- is the supreme Christian virtue. How can we further strengthen *that* kind of love among us?

We heard in the Gospel how the people in Jesus' home synagogue decided that *their* community was *complete* and didn't need *him*. He left Nazareth and never went back. How can we remember that Christ is the Head of our Church in every sense? Renewal and growth all starts there.

In its history, Christ Church has been at its best when it exalted Christ as Head of the Church, nurtured self-sacrificing love and incorporated all ages into its community. Let's think about our history, because it is of great interest and value not just for its own sake, but for your *future* as a parish.

When the Declaration of Independence was read outside these doors in 1776, Christ Church had not yet had its 34th birthday. Had there been a betting line in those days, the "smart money" would have said that Christ Church would not make it to its *50th* birthday, never mind its 270th, which we celebrated last October. "This is a Church of *England* church," I can hear some people say;

“how can we exist without being part of the British Empire? We’ve never done it that way before!”

Christ Church said, “Just watch us.”

After some very tumultuous years, the American Revolution was won, and a new breed of Christian emerged -- *here*, right where you’re sitting: *American Anglicans, Episcopalian*s. In fact, the meeting before the very first General Convention of this new invention, The Episcopal Church, was *right here* [I point at the floor]. And this new kind of church went about *electing bishops*, not waiting for the king to appoint them. I can just hear some people say, “We’ve never done it that way before.” Christ Church said, “Just watch us.” And the first bishop of New Jersey was -- where? [“Here!”] Right. He served part-time as Bishop of New Jersey and *part-time* as Rector of Christ Church.

In 1853, the congregation was bursting at the seams of the old, pre-Revolutionary War building. I expected some people resisted the idea of building a new and bigger sanctuary. “We’ve never done it that way before.” Christ Church said, “Just watch us.” In the same century, Christ Church was one of the pioneer churches in this area to install -- gasp -- an *organ* to lead congregational music. Some may have said, “We’ve never done it that way before.” Christ Church said -- say it with me, “Just watch us.”

Christ Church, like most Episcopal churches for over a century after English financial support was withdrawn, was supported financially by pew rents. Pew rents worked like buying season tickets to the symphony or the ballpark: box seats [I point to the front pews] and bleachers [I point to the balcony]. In the 1920’s, Christ Church abolished pew rents and introduced this radical “new” idea of *pledges* -- biblically-based voluntary financial commitments -- coupled with allowing people to sit anywhere they wanted. No doubt some said, “We’ve never done it that way before.” Christ Church said [unison], “Just watch us.”

Beginning in the 1970’s, Christ Church experienced a significant influx of black people who wanted to take their rightful place as equal members of the congregation just as all people are equal in the sight of God. Some people said -- well, some of the things that might have been said probably shouldn’t be repeated here, but I think the polite term would be, “We’ve never done it that way before.” Some very determined members of Christ Church said [in unison], “Just watch us.” We are their heirs -- *all* of us.

Hiring women priests as rectors? Some churches said, “We’ve never done it that way before.” Christ Church said [unison], “Just watch us.” Welcoming gays and lesbians as equal children of God? Some churches still say, “We’ve never done it that way before.” Christ Church says [unison], “Just watch us.”

So, historic Christ Church, your *history* is a history of *struggle and innovation*, among other things. You will continue to need to adapt and develop while staying true to Jesus Christ and to the Episcopal Church. Every church could wear a T-shirt which on one side says, “Parts of me are excellent” and on the other side says, “God isn’t finished with me yet.” So, let’s look at your T-shirt.

Parts of Christ Church are excellent -- not perfect, but excellent. Liturgy, especially music. Outreach ministries -- the Food Pantry, Elijah’s Promise Soup Kitchen, the Men’s Homeless Shelter, a children’s library in Sierra Leone, Nets for Life to combat malaria in sub-Saharan Africa. We have high commitment to the Church beyond this congregation -- in our diocese, our nation and the world. We have Christian formation programs for *all* ages. We have serious commitment to care for our historic and heavily-used buildings, and to know and learn from our history. We have a commitment to embrace and deploy the time and talent of a diverse array of people. We raise up people for the ordained ministry generation after generation. We use all three “legs” of the financial stewardship “stool”: annual giving, giving to capital campaigns and planned giving through bequests. Our pastoral care for members includes not only the clergy but gifted lay people as well.

It’s quite a list. A lot to be proud of -- but not to be complacent. *God is not finished with you yet*, not by a long shot. And there are some immediate challenges to start facing *this year*.

Challenge #1: Congregational development experts consider *attendance* to be the most important gauge of “how big a church is”, not the number of members whose names are recorded in a giant register book in the office. “Average Sunday Attendance is obtained by adding up all the attendance numbers from Sunday services (and some Saturday night services like the Easter Vigil) and dividing by the number of Sundays in the year. **Average Sunday Attendance is down 20% in the last four years**, from 213 in 2008 to 171 in 2012.

Now, over half of that decline occurred in 2009, which was the year the late service was shifted from 10 to 10:30 and Sunday School started at 9:30 instead of 9:45, thus doubling the amount of time families with children would need to spend here to get both education and worship. The decline also reflects the disappearance of Evensong, as of now, as a part of our worship life. And, attendance did stabilize last fall, except for the impact of Hurricane Sandy.

But however you analyze it, a 20% decline is significant. Christ Church needs to acknowledge this reality and develop a coordinated plan to reverse the decline for the sake of our service to Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church, not mere institutional self-preservation. One piece of that plan can be more *Greeters* to welcome people at services. Some churches also have *Newcomer Buddies* to help people find their way around -- around the myriad opportunities in our congregation and simply around our buildings.

Challenge #2: You have an unsustainable, structural ***budget deficit***. Take out one-time expenses like the Rector Search and you still have a budget deficit in the \$50,000+ a year range. That is being covered by drawing down your *savings* account. Ben Bernanke doesn't belong to this church; unlike the Federal Reserve, we cannot just print money. So right now, your plan is to "heat the house by burning the furniture." That's not a long-term solution. It's not even a medium term solution. And the longer this is ignored the more radical the changes will need to be.

Last year we had special mailed appeals at Easter and Christmas for items which were in the budget but not fully funded. The appeals between them raised over \$7,000, reducing our deficit by that amount. The appeals will continue this year. Last year the 270th anniversary event raised \$7,921 for the operating budget, reducing the deficit by that amount. There needs to be *some* major fund-raising event or activities this year as well. Pledges are by far our biggest source of income. So far, for 2013 we have 127 pledges for over \$282,000, and we thank all those who have made commitments. However, 127 represents less than half of the households on our mailing list. More pledges are welcome today or anytime, but in the meantime, we have had to start making budget cuts.

Some parishioners remember when we had a second priest on staff -- a curate, someone who was newly ordained, served here for a time and later became a leader of the Church somewhere else. The Rev. Marty Gutwein, now

senior priest in Camden, and the Rt. Rev. Mark Sisk, now Bishop of New York, are two of those who got their starts here. We have not been able to afford curates for some time. Now, we cannot afford a modest stipend for a *seminarian* doing Field Education here. We don't have one this school year and we won't have one next school year.

We have a wonderful music program here, but we currently have more than we can afford. At the end of this school year, the stand-alone position of Children's Choir Director will be eliminated, and we will bid a fond farewell to Renata Koumendouros, who is doing a fine job. The Children's Choir *will* continue, as the families involved know, under John Sheridan's direction, which means that his job description will be re-written to accommodate for this and to reduce some other duties. The Vestry will be taking a hard look at the rest of the budget as well.

Challenge #3. We have a splendid team committed to ministry with children, but ***fewer children*** than we used to have. How can we recruit, welcome and incorporate more families of all sorts which include children? Without them, what will this congregation look like in 10 years?

Challenge #4. *Community.* There are lots of individual communities, plural, within Christ Church, which one can discover. Most parishes have an "entry level, inclusive community of the whole" which is found in coffee hour and parish suppers. The Nicholas Room is too small for coffee hour and fellowship unless the weather is warm and sunny and we can overflow outside. We are exploring to see if it is technically possible to add two more doors between the Nicholas Room and the Children's Chapel to give more room *both* for Coffee Hour *and* for the monthly Kid-Friendly Eucharist, a project which might address at least three of these challenges -- community, children and attendance -- since without the Kid-Friendly Eucharist attendance would have fallen *more* last year, and some Sundays that Chapel is packed right now.

Do we have significant areas of excellence? Yes. Do we have challenges? Yes. *Some* churches, if changes were proposed to meet such challenges, would say, "We've never done it that way before." Based on your track record, historic Christ Church, I suspect *you* might say [in unison], "Just watch us."

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