

The Rev. Catherine A. Caimano
4 Epiphany C: Jeremiah 1:4-10; 1 Corinthians 13:1-13; Luke 4:21-30
Rector's Annual Meeting Report January 31, 2010
St. John's Episcopal Church, Wichita, KS

The 140th annual meeting of St. John's Episcopal Church will now come to order.

This year, in our stewardship letter, I mentioned that in 2009 we had the most number of pledging families and the highest amount of money pledged to St. John's EVER.

Well, it turns out I was wrong about that. I believe we did have the most amount of money pledged, but it is true that there have been years in the past that we have had more families pledging. I hope you will forgive me for this error, and I also hope that you will realize that I did not intend to mislead you, it is just that when I talk about you, St. John's, and how extraordinary you are, I just get a little carried away.

You see, regardless of what any numbers say – whether they be the numbers that say our attendance is a little down this year, or the numbers that say we have come closer to balancing our budget this year than in any other year EVER (or, maybe I should just say, in a long time) it is hard for me to see this parish as anything other than the BEST, the MOST faithful, the MOST saintly, the most extraordinary place that I have ever served.

It is easy to get carried away, because I see you every day, I see the things you do, your generosity, the way you believe in God even when things are hard, the gratitude and the joy that you possess. And I want to make sure that YOU see it, too.

I get scared that SOMETIMES, because this is a historic parish with a huge legacy of what we HAVE been, that we can lose sight of what we ARE. That we can risk celebrating the unique gifts we possess TODAY.

And also, like in the Gospel for today, we can risk not having honor in our own hometown. That it is possible, because we are right here, living out our ministry and mission in real time, that times past can loom over us, make us think that things were so much better THEN, that we can discount how wonderful we are NOW.

If we are not careful, we might miss how we are growing and changing and adapting to new neighbors, a new century, new ministry, even new buildings. Actually, I guess, they are old buildings, but we are starting to use them in new ways. At any rate, I don't want us to miss that even though many things at St. John's are not like they used to be, they are still pretty wonderful.

So I will ask for your indulgence in my exuberance. Because I see these things. I see how our ESOL classes are bringing new people into this place. I see how our campus ministry is bringing the Gospel out into the world; I see how the sandwich Saturday and the temporary shelter are bringing hope to those in need; I see how our foyer groups are

bringing us together for even more fun and fellowship; I see how our fundraising activities are bringing us new resources and new adventures; I see how our Bible Studies and prayer groups and Education for Ministry are bringing people closer to God.

Prophets are not accepted in their hometowns, Jesus says, and the implication is that people can be too close to something to truly appreciate it, and I don't want that to happen here at St. John's. I have spent this past year noticing not just new programs and policies, but how each of YOU, in your individual ways, live out the Gospel as saints of this church.

Yes, Beth Landrum and Kent Kindsvatter, I do know that you give Bob Qualls rides to church on Sunday. Yes, Iola Crandall, I do know that you take Thomas Hill to his doctor's appointments. Yes, Pat and Larry Heeren, I do know that you took Deacon Patsy into your home while she was recovering from back surgery. Yes, Randy Weber, I do know that even though you have been sick, you still show up for parish work days. Yes, Paul Massaria and Arland Wallace and Joanie and Michael, I do see that even though you are new you have jumped right into service in this community. Yes, young people of this parish, I do know that when you were brave enough to take the money I handed out at stewardship time, you used it to make the world a better place.

These are but a very few examples of all the saintly work that I see happening in this parish every day. With and without of programs and committees and agendas, I see you doing the work of the Gospel – loving your neighbor, forgiving those who hurt you, reaching out to those in need. This is the mark of an extraordinary community, and this is YOU, St. John's.

Of course, none of this work could happen without a tremendous staff and other leadership.

Cathy Harris, what would I do without you? Now, I am tempted to say that Cathy does everything around here, but that would not actually honor her or the work that she does. The truth is, I would say that her greatest accomplishment is that she does NOT do everything – she does the tasks that we have called her here to do, she does them extremely well, and she supports those who are called to do other work.

Cathy oversees the running of the office and the work of our tremendous office volunteers – Kelley Davidson, Maureen Sparks, Jayne Miller, Nadine Deardorff, Pat Heeren, Nancy Dietrich, Deanna Waggaman, and Sue O'Brien. Cathy supports me in my ministry, doing much of the calling, emailing, and letter-sending that I don't have time to do, and Cathy is our fantastic book-keeper and bill-payer, working with our treasurer to make our financial life ever more effective and productive.

I commend and thank her for all of this, and for NOT feeling like she has to do other people's jobs, which in and of itself is a fabulous skill.

And on that same note, I am once again extremely grateful to have Patsy Abshier as our deacon at St. John's. Her great faith in God, manifested in her caring for others, especially those in need, her wonderful prayer ministry, and her deep spirituality, are so appreciated by me and by the whole parish.

But I will say that what I am MOST grateful for is Patsy's ability this year, as she was undergoing her surgery and recovery, to let other people HELP her. I know this was hard, but it is truly a ministry to learn how to RECEIVE love and care from others, and it is a ministry that Patsy engaged in with great courage and grace. She is an inspiration to us all.

And speaking of inspiration, Dean Roush has continued his service into his 21st year as our music director, and I have to say, the music and the choir have never sounded better. It is so wonderful to have new, young voices complementing those who have served St. John's for many years with their great skills, and the variety and style of the selections have been outstanding. Also, I don't know if everyone realizes this, but part of being a church musician is not just to have the great musical skills that Dean clearly possesses, but also the ability to first and foremost serve the liturgy – watching and waiting and sometimes adjusting to the little things that happen during a worship service, and Dean is superb at this; this is just one reason that it is a joy to work with him.

I would be remiss if I did not mention James Adams, who is clearly a saint, and who is here every Sunday with a cheerful demeanor and a watchful eye. James goes out of his way to help people into church, to set up and make coffee, he even calls me to see if I need a ride in his big truck when it is snowing outside. He is a great gift to this whole parish.

And speaking of gifts, we are so blessed to have honorary staff members, who don't get paid but who devote a great deal of their time and talent to making sure that things run smoothly around here: Mike Morrow, who oversees our adult formation, everything from Education for Ministry to Bible Study to always recommending the PERFECT book and even purchasing books for St. John's and also for individual members; Tish Seely, who put on a fabulous Christmas pageant despite a snowstorm, and is always present to help with acolytes and other children's formation ministries;

Tim Flynn, who is our webmaster and tech guy, and without whom, frankly, the moving of our offices would never happen. He is here almost every day, fixing things and painting things and moving things and planning things. Thank you all for the saintly work that you do.

And PEG Flynn, who also wears many hats around here, is blessing us with her most important work, the study and formation process of becoming deacon in this church. Peg is a postulant, which means she is in the formal time period where she will be prepared and be in discernment for this most holy service. It is a blessing to this church, and to the whole church, to have her do this work in our midst.

I wish I could thank each and every one of you individually, but it would, literally take all day. So just a few more specific people that I simply have to point out: to our vestry, you have done fantastic work in a big year of change. Dusty McCoy, Jill Poynter, and Garry Morris, we will miss your steady spirits and your discerning minds. Blessings for you service.

Phyllis McCabe, Pat Heeren, Peg Flynn, Shirley Orr, Mike McFerren and Roger Carvalho, thank you for coming back for another year of fabulous leadership and faithful service. Phyllis has also agreed to serve as our senior warden for the coming year, which is a huge gift to me.

And speaking of senior wardens, what can I say about Philip Davidson's service for the last two years? It is hard to put into words how grateful I am. I will say that since he was also the chair of the search committee which brought me here as your rector, his was the first voice I ever heard from this parish. He WAS St. John's to me for the first few months of our acquaintance, and you will not be surprised to hear me say that his wisdom, his faithfulness, his service to the church and his absolutely relentless energy, optimism and humor, these were my first clues to what an extraordinary place this is. And he does this despite a regular job that takes him all over the country every week, including today, which is why he is not here. But thank him the next time you see him.

Bridgette Dozal is the junior warden who could. Of her many gifts – carpenter, organizer, shepherd of a large and amazing family, I have so appreciated the fact that no matter what kind of wild idea I had about something, she would always say, 'of course we can do that.' No problem. She is very cool, and extremely cool under pressure, and I have been so grateful for her strength and her sunny disposition.

And finally, our treasurer, Jennifer Westhoff. Who knew that money could be so spiritual? Who would have guessed that our very smart and serious finance committee would be moved to tears by her presentation of the budget last year, as she explained how God really is leading us into a new era of abundance? Jennifer has done simply extraordinary work as our treasurer for the last two years, and she has done nothing short of transform our financial life as a parish and re-energize our ministry as a community. I don't know where we would be without her.

OR, without all the rest of you. I have taken the time to thank so many people personally because I really want you to know, to believe, that a prophet may have no honor in his hometown, but that may be because he is too close to the action for everyone to see. You are ALL saints, and you all do extraordinary work in service to the Gospel every single day. Someday, we will all look back on THIS time and say, 'remember when things were THAT good?' and then we will look forward again and say, 'Where is God calling us NEXT? And so, St. John's you fabulous parish, where is God calling us next?

The dust will clear on the move of our offices back into this building in the next few months, but we will still have challenges ahead of us. I would love to see this congregation grow. Not just for the sake of growing, we are a perfect size now if you ask

me, but to grow from the joy of all of us spreading the word that this is an extraordinary place to worship God and to serve our neighbors.

This year has seen MANY new parishioners join us – look around at how many new faces you see, even some former members newly returning, and how many new people who have quickly become vital members of this community. That is very wonderful, but I am going to challenge all of us to reach out even more.

This year, I want us each to make a goal of bringing ONE new person to church. Studies show that the number one way that parishes grow is that members personally invite new people. Let your friends and families know that this is the place to find Jesus and to find caring neighbors and friends.

Also, we have talked a lot about children's ministry in the last year. We no longer have a Sunday school or a nursery in the traditional sense. We DO have children and young people here – and you can find them engaged in many different types of ministry, from acolytes to choir members to altar guild.

We ALSO do have children here, three nights a week, as part of our English for Speakers of Other Languages program, a unique ministry in this diocese. The learning program is for adults, but many of them bring their kids, and we always need help caring for them, so I feel that perhaps God is calling us to renew our commitment to the spiritual lives of our children by starting here. I would love to see more of us commit to spending time with the young people who are already part of our life and ministry.

And even beyond this, we have started to talk about a school at St. John's.

We are a parish that has many educators in our pews – from elementary school teachers to college professors, from those who are getting their teaching degrees to those who are retired, and I would like to start talking seriously this year about how we might serve the Gospel and this city by starting a truly excellent, tuition-free academy for those from the most difficult backgrounds. I already know there is energy for this, we have the skills and experience, and I think it is perhaps the perfect manifestation of our mission to worship and action in the name of the Gospel. You will hear much more about this as we start the conversation in earnest this year.

St. John's, THESE are our glory days. It may be hard to see sometimes, as Jesus' own friends and neighbors had trouble seeing him as the Messiah, because they were so close to him that it was hard to look beyond.

It may be hard for us sometimes, as we enter into our 140th year, to see ourselves, our ministry and life together, as it is, without feeling overshadowed by the wonderful ministry and gifts of those who came before us. But those in years before probably felt the same way, too! They were probably intimidated about how THEY would live up to the legacy that they were handed.

And this is why, although we are blessed to have the firm foundation of history, we must not forget that we are NOT the extraordinary parish of 1869 or 1939 or 1999, but we are the extraordinary parish of TODAY.

Right at this moment, God is working miracles through us, in this place, with all of our extraordinary faithfulness and dedication. It is my joy to serve as your rector in the amazing year of 2010. I ask not just your indulgence of my exuberance in this most blessed of communities, I ask you to share it with me.

Believe that this is the best year EVER at St. John's. That we are in the best place EVER in the best times there ever were. Because it is true that with God, anything and EVERYTHING is possible.