

February 6, 2011

### 147 Annual Meeting of Grace Church Parish

*You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot. You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on a lampstand, and it give light to all in the house. In the same way let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.*

I was sitting near the Altar a couple Sundays ago, and I had an Epiphany moment. To an outsider perhaps, it didn't seem particularly special. It was a relatively "normal" Sunday. No baptisms, no Christmas poinsettia, wreathes, or crèches. There was no bishop visiting-- just us. I was sitting on the bench beside the Altar, and was suddenly filled with feeling that is becoming more and more familiar to me. It used to be quite rare, occurring just every few years at the most. But now it seems to be coming with more frequency. It is a feeling hard to describe. A sense of fullness. Of Presence both within and beyond. Of peace, a peace that passes all understanding. Real as Salt. Bright as a candle in the darkness.

But there is no such thing as a normal Sunday at Grace Church. Shawn Adams was preaching powerfully about how darkness is redeemed by the Light of Christ. Susan Schaeffer was celebrating at the altar on the occasion of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her Ordination to the Priesthood. Though I was barely aware of it during the service, a number of women, each of whom had been raised in the Roman Catholic Church, approached me afterward to express their wonder that, apart from Daniel Dineen and Ben Gilsdorf, who were serving as acolytes, and me, sitting on the sidelines, only women were serving at the altar. There were orange lilies in the vases, reminding me of the promise of summer. A child was making happy sounds in the back of the church, and the choir paused to begin its anthem. One of the Eucharistic Ministers, Ruth Hooke, gently reached over to straighten out a little crease in the Fair Linen of the Altar. We prayed for the health of our beloved brothers and sisters who are sick, some quite seriously, prayed for peace in the Holy Land, in our nation, prayed for the homeless in our town, prayed for the dead, including the brother of one of our brothers in Christ, and we prayed for the Church throughout the world, so much in need of prayer.

All this was going on under the words of the stained glass window above the altar: *Why Sleep Ye? Arise and Pray.* Somehow I was particularly awake to the wonders of our life together, and could hear God whisper, "And this is Good!"

These are things we do. All these things are the normal, ordinary things that we do here. Right? Well, maybe. But sometimes, if we are blessed, if the Spirit chooses, and we happen to be awake and alive to the Spirit, God shows us that nothing is ordinary, and everything is shining with God's glory. Everything is enfolded in the loving embrace of Christ, from our most ambitious efforts, like our incredible partnership with St. Matthieu de Bayonnais in Haiti, or our support of a new homeless shelter in Amherst, or our extensive Adult Education program, "Making God Real," to our struggles to resolve a legal dispute with a contractor or, much more painfully, to our darkest moments of despair and death, as when we celebrated the wedding of a young couple in Easter week, David Radzik and Robin Fox in Easter, and then gathered in sorrow at Robin's funeral just two months later. Whatever we face, more and more we face these things together, as we trust God's light to show us the way, and awaken to Christ's love taking us by the hand.

Everything can be infused with glory. Grief. Conflict. Striving for justice, mercy, and peace. Even in times when we see no peace, God's grace, that undeserved, unmerited, unearned love of God, shows up and shows off what is real, just under the surface of the world and our life. This is what Epiphany is all about. Church is where we come to train our eyes to behold God's glory, to be awake to taste and see the salt and light of God in each of us, pervading the world, even when we aren't awake to these things.

You are the salt of the earth: you can season the earth with the sacred. You are the light of the world: you can light the world with the holy. When Jesus told his disciples that they were the salt of the earth, the light of the world, and then told them that their righteousness would exceed that of the over-scrupulous scribes and Pharisees, I wonder if he was telling them that all they needed to repair the world was right in front of them, if only they could taste and see it. By God's grace, you are already light. Be awake to it. Do not hide it. Allow God to do what you cannot do by yourself...to make your righteousness as brilliant as the noonday sun on snowy landscape.

Salt and light, both are necessary for life, and for the life of a parish. Take a look at the Annual Report. Find yourself in it. By that I don't mean merely to find your name in the list of those who are entitled by church canon to vote. Rather, find yourself seasoning and enlightening the life of this parish by your participation. If your name is not listed, perhaps it's between the lines of the work of the Outreach Commission. Or in the work of the Haiti Committee, or Greening Grace, or the Gardening Committee, or in offering office help to Annie Hondrogen, or assisting Janet Teng in the quiet, hidden but beautifying work of the Altar Guild. Or in the incredible summer teamwork that led to the historic Old Rectory getting fresh coat of paint, primed with fun and laughter. Or in welcoming worshippers to this sanctuary as an Usher. Or in supporting Nancy Lowry's Liturgical Arts Camp and her gentle yet persistent encouragement to include young people fully in our worship life. Or in making fabulous brunches with the Brother Lawrence Guild, counting the collection, or teaching Sunday school, bringing communion to the homebound, or offering a course on Isaiah and prayer, or volunteering at Not Bread Alone or the new Warming Shelter at First Baptist.

If you don't see yourself in this profile of our parish life in the past year, I truly hope that you will in this next year. The idea is not simply to see your name in print, but to share the particular salt and light that God has given you for the healing and the illumination of the parish and the world. I invite you to find yourself, in every sense of the word, and to allow the parish to help you find what your true calling is. It may be just what you think it is. Or it may yet be revealed. Allow God to give *you* an Epiphany by showing you how much you are loved. You are loved simply by being the person that God is creating you to be. As a community we do our utmost to honor our own belovedness and the belovedness of our sisters and brothers.

This promises to be a wonderful time ahead, for we will soon be able to turn our personal and material resources to ministries rather than mortar. We can make a fresh start in several areas of our life together. For instance, now that we have these new spaces and new walls, we can consider offering exhibits, readings, and performances to showcase the budding creative talents in our community.

Last spring, Royster Hedgepeth offered some helpful Sunday morning sessions that gave everyone a chance to reflect on where the Holy Spirit might be leading us. As we look ahead to the coming year, we have a chance to move forward on some of the ideas that emerged from these gatherings. Some are continuations of what we are already doing, and some may require new energy:

- Improve communication, both among ourselves and to the wider community;
- Be more attentive to the incorporation of newcomers through small groups like

the Pastorates or Coventry;

- Strengthen our outreach and participation of youth, college and university students and young adults.
- Continue to strive for a balance of spiritual contemplation and social action for the healing of the world;
- Retire our debt and other financial obligations incurred by our building;
- Recharge any parish groups that need a new infusion of energy, such as the Hospitality Committee.

That's a pretty good list. It gives us clear goals that we can work toward, measure, and achieve. We've already made some progress, but this is the year when we can really focus on the mission of the church beyond the bricks and mortar. I get to make an important announcement about that at the Annual Meeting in the Parish Hall. You won't want to miss that, so please come.

One of the highlights of the past year has been the rediscovery of what is right in front of us. Our Adult Education series have included forums where we ask members of the parish to witness to the light. Teachers, lawyers, artists, health care professionals, tradespeople, have been called upon to share the place of contact between their life of faith and their life in the world. We could do this well into the future -- why not ask homemakers, retirees, students, volunteers to speak about how this Altar refreshes their salt, renews their light, and gives them what is necessary in order to serve and shine? In ways I could not have predicted, the Gospel has been preached, and I have seen the light of Christ shine in ways that are bringing about the kingdom of God. I am convinced that if the wider Church were really to take hold of the fact -- as we have -- that the Holy Spirit is alive and active not just among ordained clergy but also among all the baptized, and not just inside the Church but also beyond the Church's walls, the wider Church would be awakened from its present torpor. The wider Church would be released from its steady, decades' long decline; it would be restored and renewed. It would understand again that its task is to nourish and equip the saints, which are all the people I now behold in front of me. You are the light of the world! I give God thanks that together you and I have the privilege of being nourished through Word and Sacrament by the riches of God's grace.

In closing, it's hard not to cite St. Paul's valediction to one of his favorite Churches. This is what he wrote to the church in Philippi:

*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

*Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen [in each other], and the God of peace will be with you.*  
(Philippians 4:4-9)

*The Rev. A. Robert Hirschfeld, Rector*