

Annual Meeting Sermon
January 26, 2020

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Today we have our annual meeting after this service and as I have done in the past, I will use the sermon time to share my thoughts about life at St. Peter's in 2019 a.k.a my annual report. However, I do want to begin with scripture.

In our gospel this morning, John has been arrested – that same John who we have been hearing about these past few weeks. John the Baptist who spoke of the one who was to come, who came proclaiming a baptism of repentance. The same John who saw Jesus and declared here is the lamb of God who forgives the sins of the world. And now he has been arrested for proclaiming a truth King Herod did not want to here and so John is thrown in jail. On hearing this news, Jesus leaves his home and withdraws to Capernaum. And our gospel says this is to fulfill the scripture from Isaiah.

“Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles — the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.”

John's arrest signals a time of darkness – a time that was already happening – oppressive rule, no freedom of speech, fear of arrest and death. But Jesus does not withdraw to hide and be quiet. Jesus got busy and went around proclaiming that the kingdom of heaven had come near. He walked around and noticed people. As he walks along the shore, when he encounters some fishermen with their nets, he calls them to follow him and tells them that they will be fishers of men.

I don't know about you, but it seems to me that we too live in a world where we sit in darkness. There is much despair, trouble injustice and more that is wrong with the world. I am not going to describe it. Think for a few seconds all that you despair about in the world. We may well want to withdraw and keep quiet, and go about our lives as best as we can, BUT that is not what Jesus calls us to do. Jesus calls us and sends us out to be fishers of people.

Now you may be saying now hold up Rev. Anne-Marie. I'm not going out to fish for people. My life is hard enough and enough trouble as it is. I'm just trying to make it. Well, bear with me. Let's talk about what it is like to fish for people and I hope you'll be surprised at how many ways you are already entering into this call right here at St. Peters.

A few weeks ago the Way of St. Paul team, whose work it is to help this church grow and become strong in our discipleship, was meeting and talking about just that – how we at St. Peter's can become strong disciples of Christ- a vibrant faith community that is following Jesus' call. What we know about a stronger vibrant church is that is that it requires friendship – not just any friendship but friendship in the way Jesus taught us to be friends - and clear purpose – to know what we are about as a faith community which is to create disciples of Jesus Christ.

We began talking about the various ministries at St. Peter's and how discipleship was happening. One of our members Ralph Richardson who is very observant of what is happening around him said you know what we do well at St. Peter's, we create community, and in those communities we have the opportunity to practice that friendship that Jesus is talking about.

He started by describing the Mother's Guild Tricky Tray where he volunteers. What he sees is not just people coming to win prizes – after all he says while some of the prizes are very nice, some are not all that and yet people drive over an hour to be there. They bring food for our Food Pantry. They donate prizes they have won in other Tricky Trays.

They spend their money generously because they believe in the work of St. Peter's and they come to a place where they can be in community – not just with the people they came with, but the St. Peter's volunteers and other attendees. The attendees and the volunteers know each other. They share their stories including when they have lost a loved one or an illness they are going through. And our volunteers at times offer to pray for them.

I want to propose to you that this is not unlike what Jesus did with the disciples who were called to be fishers of people. He didn't spend gather people in a room once a week, sing hymns, preach, share a liturgical meal and then send them out. There is nothing wrong with that. Our Sunday worship is an important part of our faith life and our coming together. Jesus went out and talked to people. He walked along the shore, saw some fishermen and asked if they would follow him and they said yes. He taught and healed and hung out with the people. That's where our ministry happens when we hang out with the people and in those places, we may find we are being asked to pray for another person either silently or aloud, we may find that we need to share our story about how Jesus sustains us or just simply hold another's hand and listen.

Ralph says also said a similar thing happens at our Food pantry. Ralph had asked Eleanor Lewis to come to our vestry discernment workshop to come and learn about what being on the vestry is like. She said yes and is running for vestry. But first she said why don't you come and see what the Food Pantry is like. Come on the next Saturday right before we take the decorations down from the church. Ralph did and that was the second place he named that he saw community. That Saturday morning, at the food delivery, Ralph saw all sorts of people he didn't know because we have people from the community and beyond who show up to help. As they unload, sort and put away the food, there is laughter and some good-natured teasing and again there is the opportunity to share the joys and despairs of life, to pray or to simply be present to another person. This is where the work of Jesus is done. This is where we become fishers of people – not to drag them back into the church, but to be present to them and share what it means to have the presence of Christ in our lives whether it is through our words or through our actions.

This kind of community is found in many other places in our church – in our bible study which is the largest it has ever been, in our Youth Group that brings our young people together for outreach, fun, and learning, in our Parish Life Council that brings together our different ministries and organizes events like our Fashion show, in the work of the Hospitality Committee and their gathering events, through our choir who create such

beautiful music for worship, our Altar Guild – small in number but mighty in what they accomplish in preparing our altar for worship, all those who greet, usher, read, and serve as sacristan, acolyte, crucifer, healing minister and lay Eucharistic minister. I see it happen in our other outreach efforts, clean up days and even in the building and grounds work.

I also see this community in our recent Sunday School discussions about how to do Sunday School differently. This year, parents, young people and other parishioners have gathered to share their thoughts about how to do Sunday School differently. As we gathered, with the teachers who have served for many many years, the parents, the youth and other parishioners, there was deep sharing about our faith, what has changed our children's lives and what we are longing for. We haven't figured it out completely yet, but if we stay in community, work together, and see how Jesus is calling, I know we will find a way and I can't wait to see what it is.

We at St. Peter's have so many ways of gathering in community and in all those ways we can be friends as Jesus asks us to be – not the friendship that is just about being besties although Jesus can really show up in those as well, but the friendship where we are present, extend a hand and be ready to see how Jesus might be present to another through our words, or actions. That is how we fish for people – we fish for people who are in need of the Good News of Jesus Christ, who need to know that the light of God does shine in the darkness – and that that light can start to shine with a helping hand, a listening ear or a prayer.

Remember that when I first talked about friendship, I also talked about purpose. At St. Peter's, we form relationships with those we encounter, we listen to them, pray with them and maybe even share how Jesus gets us through life. We are off to a great start, but we must remember why we do this.

We do this because Jesus has called us to this work, because this world is filled with darkness and we need to be bearers of Christ's light. Being clear on why we do what we do, what call we are answering, will ensure that the light we bring as the community at St. Peter's will continue to shine brightly for the years to come.