

The Rev. Wayne Nicholson
St. John's Episcopal Church, Mt. Pleasant
17th January 2010
Epiphany II, Annual Parish Meeting
John 2:1-11

In the Name of the Holy Trinity, Amen.

"Do whatever he tells you," said his mother to the servants.

And so they filled six thirty-gallon jars with water – and Jesus did the unimaginable: He turned the water into wine.

The unimaginable, the miraculous, the surprising – so goes the work of God.

I'd like to spend a few moments this morning imagining with you – you'll receive plenty of documents at the beginning of the Annual Meeting which will give you details, but for now, I'd like to reflect in a broader way what this parish feels like to me.

I told you back in 2007 that there's a fine old Jewish midrash that says that before every human being there goes a legion of angels crying out, "Make way, make way for the Image of God."

What would the world look like if we acted as though this were true?

If we *believed* it to be true?

"Make way, make way for the Image of God."

We live in relationship, you and I. We live in relationship with one another, and in that relationship – those relationships – we have the opportunity to reflect the ultimate relationship of God, which is love. The Holy Trinity, three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, bound together in the sum of the three, which is love, an icon for our own relationships.

I am, because you are. I am, because we are. I am, because God is.

Too often, I think, we live lives of splendid isolation, individually caring for ourselves instead of one another until our need for another impinges on that lonely existence. And by then we may have forgotten how to be in relationship. A church, a congregation, can do this too; a community of Christ can look too much inward, forgetting that Christ compels us to do the unimaginable and the brave: To look beyond our doors, to find our neighbor in need and to be one with them in compassion and in the name of God's love.

But God has graced this parish us with communion, and a life in Christ, where we love the neighbor, can blesses us once again.

There have been times in the history of this parish when there was no money. *No* money. Services were sporadic, but the women – yes, the women – kept the parish alive.

In more recent history there have been troubles – and, again, financial issues. By the grace of God, though, you all came together in a spirit of generosity and infused the treasury with enough to support me and the ministries of St. John's.

But I'll let you in on a secret. I'll tell you a bit of a story. And some of this may surprise those of you who've joined us in the past year or so.

When I arrived, you were tired. You'd been through a rough time – emotionally, spiritually, financially.

The Bishop said to me, "You have one job to do: Love them."

Well, that wasn't hard. You're easy to love.

I believe that it is because of your love for one another, your outpouring of love toward me, your commitment to The Episcopal Church of St. John the Evangelist, and your understanding of the Baptismal Covenant that we are where we are today.

I have good news for you, my friends.

In December 2008 our Vestry passed a deficit budget. We didn't like it, but believed that we were called to live in abundance, and our resources would allow us to live beyond our means. By late spring, however, it appeared that our deficit would be even larger than projected – St. John's would be sailing in dangerous waters if we continued that particular journey. And so I sent you a "Once in a blue moon" letter, asking you to prayerfully consider adding a 13th month to your annual pledge.

You responded with grace and generosity. In the space of one month we went from a deficit to safer waters.

But what is important, I think, is to tell you that your generosity has continued through the year.

As I said, the budget projected a year-end deficit of about \$11,000. But in fact, we ended the year 2009 with a *surplus* of about \$6,000!

This was unimaginable, miraculous, and surprising!

And this, to me, is what it means.

First, of course, it means that our members are generous. By the grace of God we share our relative abundance.

Second, it means that your Vestry and our staff are conservative spenders. Our Secretary, Sandy, does a great job comparison shopping for office supplies. I try to keep my trips to Grand Rapids to a minimum. Thanks to gracious angels our choral scholar program keeps within budget.

But third, and most important to me, all of this means that we can now stop focusing on finances and ourselves. It has been important – critical, in fact – that St. John’s concern itself with finances and budgets in order to keep our staff supported and our programs and ministries going. But when all is said and done, we are now in a better position, a stronger position, to look outward, to re-focus our energy and our resources on outreach and mission.

I have been delighted that during the past two Vestry meetings we’ve spent a good amount of time talking about both outreach and mission, and you’ll see further details in the annual report.

But it is important for me to say that it is very encouraging to now operate more from a place of abundance. Because when we are faithful stewards of our treasure we are able to navigate stormy waters with courage, not fear, from peace, not anxiety – and we are able to reach out to those who are literally drowning, pulling them to safety as best we can, being the hands of Christ in a broken world.

Another important item you’ll see in our Annual Report has to do with attendance. Now I’m required by Canon Law to report membership and attendance numbers every year to the Diocese and the National Church – and to Vestry and to you. What you will see is cause for great celebration. In 2008, our annual Sunday attendance was a little over 75. In 2009, our average Sunday attendance was over 98. I was shocked! Nearly verklempt!

Now I know that when I look out at you all I see pews that are more full – new faces and longer-time members who are attending more regularly. But I really didn’t know that we’d increased by what is that – *thirty percent?!?* I’m encouraged, too, by having eight new members making a financial commitment in the form of an annual pledge.

St. John’s has reasons to celebrate! Many of them!

Finally, I want to say something about prayer. Henry Fulton once asked me, “In a sentence, what is your overarching goal for St. John’s.” With barely a breath, I said, “That we become a house of prayer.”

Because it is from prayer that all of our work for God flows. If we’re not prayerful, we’re not much more than a social service agency with pretty clothes and nice music.

But if we act out of prayer, our treasure is multiplied over and over. In prayer we become more mindful of the needs of others, more engaged with the needs of the world. We will yearn

more deeply to be the hands of Christ. We will worship and play together as a closer community, holding one another in the love of God's warm embrace.

And we will make a difference in the world, all in the name of Christ.

I am so blessed to be your priest. I thank you from the deep well of my heart for that privilege. And I thank you for growing this parish with me - for worshiping, for fellowship and fun, for outreach, and for mission.

I do believe God smiles upon this parish.

And for this I say, *Thank you.*

Amen.