

The Rev. Wayne Nicholson
St. John's Episcopal Church, Mount Pleasant
Sunday, January 20th, 2008
Pentecost 7, Proper 11 B
Isaiah 49:1-7
John 1:29-42

Psalm 40:1-12

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind-- just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you-- so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

(St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians)

I was mulling over - racking my brain, actually - what to say to you this morning as we bring to conclusion our year gone by. I decided it was time to call upon the Muse of all Sermons, St. Perplexia (who is sister to Sancta Saturday-nightia).

"Greetings, O Muse." (She likes to be formally addressed.)

"Why, greetings back atcha, Padre! Howzit?" (Her formality is one-sided.)

"Well, I'm stuck. What the heck am I going to talk about tomorrow? It's our annual meeting day and I'm supposed to say something about the state of the Parish."

"Well, St. John's appears to be growing and happy and spiritually healthy - what's the problema, O Padre mio?"

"I just don't know how to get started... Should I just tell them that I love them?"

"Noooo, too simple. Too smarmy. Too much hoping they'll say, 'We love you, too!'"

"Should I talk about the amazing results of our pledge campaign?"

"Noooo, it's really happy-making, but a bit too secular. Too business like. Don't talk about money."

"Well then, should I just give the statistics for 2007? You know, so many Eucharists, so many Morning Prayers, that sort of thing?"

"Noooo, anyone can figure those out."

"Welllll, O Sermonic Muse, what *should* I talk about?"

"Why don't you talk about love? Not the way you mentioned, about how you love them, true as that may be. But about how the love of God in Christ has

enriched their lives. About how the love of God in Christ has enriched the lives of those they have touched. About how the love of God is here, right here, right now, present in this Parish, strengthening them, calling them into the fellowship of his Son, sending them into the world to be his hands at work."

"Huh? Ummmm, that's sort of a lot to handle within my allotted time frame..."

"OK, start here.

God loves you."

"Me?"

"Yes, you."

"OK, I believe that. I can handle that. What next?"

"God loves *them*."

"Them?"

"Your parishioners, you dolt."

"Oh. Gotcha."

"I thought you might. You do believe that, don't you?"

"Oh, Lordy, yes. I know that God loves each and every one of them. I know that God cherishes them, has loved them, will love them - even when they're down in the dumps, even when they're angry, even when they're not very nice. God isn't like Santa Claus."

"You're getting it."

"Thanks, O Muse."

"No prob., Padre."

"OK. I'll start with something like, 'God loves me and God loves you.'"

"Well, that's a so-so beginning, but you're catching my drift."

"What next?"

"Oh, dear, this is more difficult than I'd imagined... Well, now you might talk about how God's love is manifest in this parish. You do understand what I mean, don't you?"

"Oh, yes. Like the way God's love inspired us to adopt a family at Christmas. Or the way God's love inspired us to put a whole lot of backpacks into the hands of some kids whose families don't have the money for things like that. Or the way God's love inspired us to install a washing machine and dryer to start a new ministry. (I've gotta tell you, Muse, I thought that was really one wacky idea - and look how wrong I was! Nearly fifty families benefited from that project in the last couple of months!) How about the way God's love urged us to have *eleven* services for Holy Week (does that count?). Or the way God's love inspired us to open the parish hall so that at-risk kids would have a place to hang out

after school that was safe and welcoming? Or how God's love led us... wow, there are a lot of examples, aren't there, Ms. Muse?"

"Yes, there are. God's love is wildly alive in this Parish. You need to tell them that."

"God's love is wildly alive in this Parish."

"Well, you might be more subtle. More poetic."

"I see. Well, I have a bad head cold. Cut me some slack, OK?"

"OK, now that I've reminded them that God's love is here in this parish, right here at St. John's, what do I do next? I mean, I'm only about seven hundred words into this thing, and I usually average about twelve hundred."

"Why don't you dream a bit?"

"Huh? dream?"

"Yes. Let your imagination take flight."

"Well, OK, I'll give it a try..."

"I have a dreeeam, a dreeeam about yooouuu, baby..."

"Uh. Not what I had in mind."

"Oh. I thought not. I was just making sure you were paying attention. Well, what about planting little seeds? You know, giving people things to think about this year - maybe some of them will fall on fertile ground, like Jesus said? And maybe some of them will fall on the rocks..."

"OK, like...?"

"Well, next year, 2009, is our 125th anniversary."

"Exciting!"

"Um, well, *yeah!* I'm thinking - special services, fundraisers for the Goodrow Fund, concerts, art exhibits, a visit from His Grace, Our Lord Bishop. I'm also thinking about planting another seed (ssshhhh, this is secret): *a capital campaign*. But before we can think about those things we really need to be creative - to reach out more intentionally to the campus, to enhance our spiritual formation, to lead our children. Build on our strengths. But that doesn't mean we can't dream, does it? I mean... what if five of us joined the Bishop's mission trip to Mississippi this fall?"

"Five?!? What's wrong with ten? fifteen?"

"Oh, nothing, of course - I was just being a bit...well, perhaps a bit conservative."

"Well, *that's* a first... Padre, padre, padre. Remember the line you heard a couple of weeks ago? *'Make very excellent mistakes.'* If you want to join the Bishop's mission trip, get ten parishioners to go with you! Get fifteen!"

"Um. Well, OK! Why not?"

"What other dreams, Vicah?"

"I'd like to offer spiritual direction to all of our parishioners. Right here. Some of them can't drive down to Three Rivers or over to Grand Rapids, and I think it

could really enhance the spiritual lives of many people right here – and when individuals grow in Christ, so does the parish.”

“Attaboy! Dream on!”

“A nighttime labyrinth at CMU.”

“Wow!”

“Movie nights in Lent.”

“Great. Just be sure you watch them first...remember the prologue of “Jesus of Montreal.””

“Shhhheeeesh, I’ll never forget it...”

“Hahaha!!!”

“Naughty muse.”

“Well, there’s all the so-called ‘normal’ things we do at St. John’s – Evensongs, worship outdoors, pot-lucks, Easter baskets for people in need. I think it’s great that we’re hosting the Young Teens Network in the Parish Hall – I hope some of our parishioners stop by just to say ‘hi’ once in a while, let them know they’re welcome.”

“You’ve turned off the dream machine, Wayne-o. You’re now approaching reality.”

“Yeah, Musie, I guess I am. I mean... I like to dream, and there are plenty of people in this Parish who like to dream with me. But I think that in addition to the dreaming we need to be thankful for the ministries we have right now. Be thankful. Strengthen them. Build them up.”

“You’re right, Padre. And you need to get the word out that St. John’s is alive and lively – serving the community, stepping out into the world, all in the name of God in Christ Jesus. Fergoshsakes, stop hiding that good news!”

“You’re right, too, Saint Perplexia. And thanks for the reminder. I’m getting a clearer picture now. A picture of St. John’s as a spiritual center, where lives are nourished, where hearts are strengthened, where we worship God in Christ so that we can be God’s hands at work in a broken world.”

“Yes yes yes. You know, for a simple country parson, you sometimes say the wildest things.”

“That’s because God’s love is wild. Reckless. Unimaginable. And it’s God’s love that keeps us going.”

“Right you are, Padre, right you are. Um, I’m going to have to ring off now. Your friend Gretchen is calling me on another line – *her* annual meeting is tomorrow too.”

“Well, give her my love and remind her: God loves her.”

“God loves everybody, Padre. Everybody.”

“Thanks, Music.”