

Annual Meeting Address

May 7, 2017

The Rev. Emily Richards

This morning we hear two stories about our patron saint, fitting as we celebrate another year together in ministry. Both stories are post-resurrection experiences, one an encounter with Christ himself and the other an encounter with the divine in a dream and in a stranger. Both teach Peter about his identity and purpose as a newly minted apostle. The passage in Acts is one of my favorite stories about Peter. It was clearly a favorite of his too because in years following the experience Peter himself would tell his listeners that only the day of Pentecost had so shaped his life and faith. Peter was in the camp who believed that this new Christian way was meant only for those of the Jewish faith like him and the other disciples. Through this dream and then his encounter with Cornelius, a Gentile soldier in the Roman army, Peter realized otherwise. The Rev. Sam Portaro writes about Peter, "He did not have to go baptize Cornelius. In fact, his better instincts might have taught him to be more cautious...He did not have to tell anyone of his strange dream. He could have just stayed put and Christianity would have remained a sect. But Peter ventured beyond the protective confines. Each of us has at someplace in our lives a challenge to grow, to change. Each of us is challenged to move beyond our prejudices and into those areas where even our deepest convictions stay our feet. Not every instance is as dramatic as Peter's, but each is of equal importance."

There could be no more pertinent a story for the Church today than this one. The greatest challenge and opportunity as followers of Jesus Christ here in our corner of the world and certainly throughout our nation is whether we will pay attention to God's dream for and be able to venture beyond our protective confines or ignore the way the Spirit is moving and stay put because it is safer and far less scary. A year ago, as I stood before many of you, there were others of us gathering just a few miles down the road for another annual meeting. We were still two separate communities made up of Philippians and Peterians, on the brink of venturing beyond what was safe and known. And here we are today, no longer us and them, beginning to see the fruits of all that prayer and hard work our vestries did. We have taken up their mantle and continue to carry on the holy work they started on our behalf. We celebrate today how far we've come and how much stronger we are together while also knowing our work is not over.

In fact, this second year of marriage is when we stop being so polite and patient and engage in deepening the relationship so that it can be long-lasting. My hope for us is next year at this same time we will know each other's stories better and not just each other's names or what we do in the church. That like Peter with Cornelius we begin to see each other's stories as making a difference in our own.

The blending of our St. Peterian and St. Philipian communities is not the only way we are being challenged to step out of our protective confines. This year a group of dedicated leaders, parents and vestry members engaged in on-going conversation around the future of our children's and youth ministries. If you have not already done so, I encourage you to read the report that fleshes out the details of our work and where we are headed. What continues to crystallize for me is that we can no longer assume that how we did children's and youth ministry when I grew up or when you and many of your children grew up is going to work now or is even needed now. It's going to require a lot of perseverance, creativity and thinking outside of the box to figure out how best to minister to our children and youth and their families in this different cultural context.

At the encouragement of a clergy friend who works with youth I recently watched the Netflix hit series *Thirteen Reasons Why* which chronicles the weeks leading up to a teenager's suicide. It was so hard to watch as a mother heading into these years with my daughter. And even though it did not address all the complexities of suicide especially in relationship to mental health issues, it did show clearly what our teens experience in this confusing world they grow up in today. And it only reinforced for me the need for our youth and children to have a safe place and to have safe people they can go to in which to grapple with all the complexities of life they are facing at such young ages. Ultimately, the core of this ministry does not change. It's about relationship, relationships with adults who want to be on the journey with them, relationships with their peers and relationships with the source that binds us all together: God. It's how we choose to participate in this ministry and cultivate such opportunities for our young people that we must do innovatively.

I dare say that it is not only our kids who need a sanctuary these days. We live in interesting times, as the saying goes. I know I didn't grow up in the sixties or live

through World War II like many of you. But in my lifetime, this year was the most tumultuous I've ever experienced. The election and post-election seasons have been fraught with fear and divisiveness for us Americans. Many of us feel unsafe in our neighborhoods and in the country, we call home. Racism, sexism, xenophobia, and classicism have reared their ugly heads in ways many of us never thought imaginable. If there's one thing this year has taught me it's that if we forget we belong to one another, freedom and prosperity is not possible for any of us. It's why we have the sign, *Love Your Neighbor* out front so that if we are tempted to forget, this church will stand as a constant reminder. Sunday seventeen members of our congregation participated in the Peace Walk, more than any other Episcopal congregation in our diocese, maybe more than any other church. It's in this kind of experience we serve as witnesses to the power of Christ's love, a love that knows no bounds, not even those created by religion. And that through the story and encounter with a perceived stranger, hearts and minds can be changed. The Episcopal Church, our church has never been more relevant. We need not be afraid to claim our voices and share our witness so that our nation can be a sanctuary for all.

In the Gospel account from John, Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves him. And each time, in response to Peter's affirmation, Jesus tells him to care for his sheep. God's people are hungry. They are starving for connection and belonging and meaning. An opportunity that lies ahead for us is to be more involved as the church in our community, to partner with those who are already doing amazing work that responds to Jesus' plea to care for his sheep. Our buildings, programs and traditions no longer must limit our identity or our purpose. Jesus tells us to feed his sheep. But he doesn't tell us how or where to do so. Presiding Bishop Curry invites us to be participants in the Jesus Movement and to embrace the limitless possibilities that are out there for us to see what Jesus is already in doing and what we can do to as shepherds with Jesus. "The church can no longer wait for its congregation to come to it, the church must go where the congregation is," he says. "Now is our time to go. To go into the world and help to be agents and instruments of God's reconciliation. To go into the world, let the world know that there is a God who loves us, a God who will not let us go, and that that love can set us all free." If you love me, Jesus says, then go, go and care for my people wherever you may find them.

To move beyond the safety of our beloved buildings, programs and traditions and to become agents of Christ's transformative love takes a great deal of courage. And friends, we have it in spades. This year I witnessed your courage as you let go of your sacred space and began anew by making this your church home. I witnessed it as you made the difficult decision to end the thirty plus year ministry of the Thrift Shop, trusting that its legacy will carry on in new ways. I witnessed it when you took to the streets and marched for the rights of the powerless and voiceless. I witnessed it when you stepped out in faith to journey with our young people. I witnessed it as you fought your own personal darkness of illness, addiction or loss with fierce hope. We have all that we need right here - the courage, commitment and faith to follow Jesus to places we never imagined we'd go and do things we never imagined possible.

Henri Nouwen envisions community as a beautiful mosaic consisting of thousands of little stones. "Some are blue, some are green, some are yellow, some are gold. Some brilliantly sparkle, some serenely exude peace...some have soft, smooth edges and some have sharper, lively edges. When we bring our faces close to the mosaic, we can admire the individuality of each stone. But as we step back from it, we can see that all these little stones reveal to us a beautiful picture, telling a story none of these stones can tell by itself. That is what our life in community is about. Each of us is like a little stone, but together we reveal the face of God to the world. Nobody can say: 'I make God visible.' But others who see us together can say: 'They make God visible.' Community is where humility and glory touch."

Sometimes we need to take a step back to glimpse the bigger picture. That's what this day is for, to celebrate where we've been and to recognize that as beautiful as our individual acts of worship and service and fellowship are, it is when we put them all together that we make the light and love of God visible in our world. I give thanks to God for another year with all of you and for the great privilege to be one of those little stones helping to create the glorious mosaic that is our community. I can't wait to see what we create in the year to come as members of the Episcopal branch of the Jesus Movement. *Amen.*