

Annual Parish Meeting Sermon (Sunday, April 22, 2007)
Breakfast on the Beach – John 21:1-14
Susan Flanders

Today is a day to celebrate this parish community, this day of our Annual Parish Meeting. After our worship, we'll meet to elect lay leadership for the coming year, hear various reports on the past year and look ahead to the challenge and promise of renewing our worship space with the Lift High the Cross project.

I want to say a few things about the journey we've traveled together as a community since last year's meeting. I also want to draw on this morning's Gospel reading for some highlights of what it means to be a Christian faith community.

It's been a tumultuous year in several ways, beginning last May when, after a long process of analysis of our organ situation, months of information gathering, we learned that one very attractive offer from an organ builder would not be available much longer. Meanwhile, our organ had malfunctioned on Easter and later on Pentecost, and, in the midst of all this, our then new Music Director announced his departure for another position. After what proved too hasty an attempt to make a decision, we did what churches do, we formed committees: The Organ Builder Selection committee, headed by Cynthia Stroman and the Architectural Review Committee headed by Suzanne Welch, both performed superbly over the summer in comparing options, holding listening sessions and bringing to the vestry the information they needed to go forward. Meanwhile, Christine Curto led a highly successful Music Director Search Committee (after all, they'd just done this 2 years ago!). We said good-bye to Douglas, the J2A class went off to Spain on the first pilgrimage of this program; the Youth Group went to Camp Joy; we began Summer Salad Seminars for informal fellowship and education. In June, Pam Kempf announced her retirement in September, and another search was on. More effectively than ever, the Finance Committee worked all through the summer – no August break for them – to prepare budget options so that the Stewardship Committee could plan the fall pledge drive and the vestry could make the hard choices always needed to balance the budget.

Momentum grew all summer, and by September we had recommendations for the Berghaus Organ Builders and the Kerns Architectural Group. In early October, the vestry moved to go forward with our project, and Bill Fry and Richard Saltsman agreed to lead the Lift High the Cross Campaign – more about that from them later. Leslie MacKnight joined the staff as secretary in October, and in December we called Anne Timpane as our Music

Director. She began on February 1st, and so far her extraordinary honeymoon continues. I am in awe of all that you bring to us, Anne, and enormously grateful that you and your family are part of this community. In January, the Strategic Planning Team, led by Claudia Tidwell and Wendell Rayburn delivered an exceptionally fine report which I hope you've all read. It is an excellent roadmap for the next few years, and the vestry is working on responses to the many issues and goals outlined.

Meanwhile, all the usual workings of church life have gone on – baptisms and weddings and funerals and new members, worship and Sunday School and pastoral care and all manner of fellowship events. Attendance has been consistently higher than last year from Christmas through Easter.

This past year has been exhilarating, scary, sobering and humbling. My seminary training and prior parish experience did not equip me too well for the personnel management aspect of my job, and last fall brought some real tension and upset between me and several dedicated lay leaders. Since then, we have been working with a consultant and one another to address these problems and have, I think, made good progress. We are learning how to better organize our vestry and program committees so that we'll be clearer about the roles and process of these groups and how we can best support lay leadership and have more effective communication throughout the parish.

You'll learn more about the past year at the meeting, but, from my point of view, (and it is just one) this has been a very full year – one of growth and growing pains, excitement, anxiety, and huge expectation, both about our capital project and a sense of being poised at the brink of a new chapter in the history of St. John's.

And then, just three weeks ago, we were stunned by the sudden grave illness of Harrison – and, praise be to God, he has come through triple bypass surgery beautifully – I saw him yesterday and am thrilled to report that he is doing very well and on the road to full recovery. But this has been a life-changing experience for him and has had a profound impact on our community – on me, on our vestry, on all of you. The vulnerability of our Associate Rector, so well loved here, reminds us of the human frailty we all share – the ways that life can surprise us and dissolve our illusions of control. Suddenly, what is most important about our community becomes clear. We are here to be in loving relationship with each other and with God. We are here to share and explore faith and to connect it with the real lives we live. We are here to celebrate our experiences of God and to wonder together about the times when God seems absent or too mysterious to fathom. How do we live out our sense of God as shown to us in Jesus Christ?

And so, this morning's Gospel comes to us as a marvelous gift. Of all the stories of resurrection appearances of Jesus, this is my favorite! Imagine - meeting this risen Jesus looking very human, very normal, on a nice stretch of beach after some early morning fishing. He's offered some good advice about where the fish are biting, and now the empty nets are full, bursting with fish, and there's Jesus, grilling a nice piece of rockfish on a hibachi along with some crusty bread with olive oil, toasting nicely. He invites us to come and have breakfast; there's plenty.

In the story, the risen Jesus has three things to offer the confused and grieving disciples after his death: encouragement in their work (try one more time, try a new place to fish), abundance - plenty of fish, and nourishment - the breakfast on the beach. Encouragement, abundance and nourishment. Seen as a metaphor, this story can speak to what we might both receive and give as members of this church.

From our tiniest children to our most senior members, can we encourage one another? Encouragement to try again when we fail, encouragement to get involved, encouragement to try something new - a different approach, a new way of thinking, a new way of using our resources of time and talent and money - here and elsewhere.

Abundance - in a world where scarcity is an all too prevalent mind set, can we come here and be reminded of the abundance of our lives compared with the radical scarcity in so many other places. Can we both give thanks for all that we have and reach out in love to people who are poor and in need? There are people in great need among us as well - our abundance should not blind us to this, but make us more sensitive. Can we both celebrate and give back out of our abundance?

Nourishment - what Jesus offered, is offered here in so many ways. Nourishment for mind and spirit and body as well. This is a community where we are fed! Whether it is a 1st Sunday Brunch, a 3rd Sunday Supper, a pancake supper of Ball & Auction or last night's Broadway & Chocolate, the food and fellowship at St. John's are plentiful and offered to all. For nourishment of our minds and our spirits we look to worship and classes and forums - opportunities for children and adults as well to stretch and enrich our faith.

And, week in and week out, we come together for sacramental nourishment at communion - at the Lord's table where bread and wine and blessing are offered to everyone. It has been said that at this table no one has too much, no one has too little, and everyone has enough. That's a powerful

symbol for how the world might be if God's will could ever be truly done on earth. Every time we gather at this table, it is to be fed in some way, holding out our hands expectantly for something of God. And then, at the end, we are sent out, encouraged, to "go in peace, to love and serve the Lord" and to do this by loving and serving others, giving generously out of all that we've been given.

I'm reading a lot into John's little story about Jesus meeting his friends on the beach. But here we are - 2000 years later, trying to be a faithful community of friends of Jesus, and maybe the story helps us to focus on the heart of what that means. Amen