

The Rector's Annual Address to the Parish of St. Francis Episcopal Church

Today is the occasion of our Annual Meeting, a day for us to come together as a parish to check in and see where we are. At our meeting after the 10:30 service, we'll elect new vestry members, receive reports of various ministries and take a look at our parish budget for 2015. If we were truthful, most of us would just as soon skip this annual business, and some of you will. But it's an important part of our life together. It reminds us, first of all, that we do have a life together, that we're part of the church, the Body of Christ, and as such we are called to do far more than just gather on Sunday mornings. Just as the canons require us to meet annually as a parish, they also require me to give you an annual report. Last year I spoke to you from the pulpit, as I am doing today, so that all of you will have the pleasure of hearing my perspective whether you come to the meeting or not. I pray that each of you will find something worthwhile in what I have to say. More importantly, I pray that the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart will be acceptable in the sight of our Lord, who is my strength and my redeemer. *Amen.*

Today we hear the words of two prophets, Isaiah and John the Baptist, and in these lessons we can easily recognize the message of God that connected the exiled Israelites to those who were following Jesus many years later. "A voice cries out, 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.'" Isaiah spoke those words to encourage the Israelites, to remind them of God's promises, to give them hope for the future. They had spent those long, hard, painful years of the exile hanging on to the memories of how things used to be. We're like that sometimes, too, aren't we? We can almost always find something in our past that seems to have been better than the present. When it comes to the past, our memories are often selective in that we remember the good things and cast aside the difficulties. That's not necessarily bad—unless it prevents us from living life fully in the present or looking forward to the future.

The church as we know it is in a period of transition. You've heard me say that before, and you're probably tired of hearing me say it because I have not offered you any description of what it will be like in the future. I don't know. Like many of you, I remember what church was like in the 1950s and sixties, and even into the eighties and nineties. For so many of us in those days, church was our center—a gathering place that brought together our religious, spiritual and social lives. Whether we like it or not, that is no longer the case. As the church in the twenty-first century, we catch people "on the fly." The demands of our lives have made us busy people. In fact, busyness has become akin to purpose in our lives. Regardless of whatever it is that makes us busy, our busyness defines us and signifies our importance both to ourselves and to those with whom we interact. If you've ever tried to schedule a meeting with more than two people, you know just what I mean. Sometimes working the church and our responsibilities to it into our busyness is next to impossible.

This period of the church's transition is often uncomfortable. We cling to the past because it's familiar and safe, and more often than we'd like to admit, that has the opposite effect of what we hope for. Holding on to the past affects our creativity, our imagination, our willingness to try new things and take risks. Even as we say we trust God to guide and protect us, we fearfully lock ourselves in the past, just as the disciples fearfully locked themselves in the upper room after Jesus died. I can speak about this with authenticity, not only because of what I see in our parish, but in myself through the transition in my personal life. As I am beginning to come out of the fog of grief a year and a half after Dick's death, I'm feeling the pull between the security of church life and the rectory where I live alone, and the world on the other side of the door, where there is community and energy and life. God did not mean for us to live in fear or cling to safety, but calls us to NEW LIFE in our Lord Jesus Christ. Yet we resist. During my three and a half years with you, I've noticed that when you and I disagree about our life together it's about "internal" things, about practices and

traditions and the way we've *always* done them, even when the way we've always done them contradicts the theology and practice of our Episcopal faith.

It is with much thanksgiving that I've also noticed that these disagreements between us occur less frequently than before, and that as a parish we're involved in some very meaningful work. Our annual Community Thanksgiving Luncheon, the Angel Tree Ministry to children of incarcerated parents, and our participation with other local churches in feeding folks in our neighborhood at the Welcome Table are direct responses to Christ's call to serve him by serving the least of these. Those who lead these ministries do so from their own passion and sense of call, and while I am thankful for them, I'm especially thankful that their leadership and excitement has drawn so many of you to join with them in these ministries.

Likewise, I'm thankful for your response to New Consecration Sunday, which invited us to focus our giving on God, rather than on the needs of the church or its budget. We were reminded that balancing the budget is not the point of our giving. The point is to give back to God from what God has given us. Your overwhelming response indicates that's what you've done, and when we consider your increased giving plus an increase in our outreach activities, we can see a shift in both our perspective and our focus, from the inward to the outward. When I was called here, I was told that as a parish you were ready to move into the next phase of your journey together, and that now appears to be happening.

Before I speak about what that next phase might look like, I want to mention two things I believe to be important to our parish. First is our need to care for each other. In our current directory, there are 95 households representing 174 people. Twenty-seven households are single folks, and almost half of those are...well, let's just say they aren't spring chickens anymore. At least half of them are unable to attend services regularly if ever, and have the added difficulty of getting to doctor appointments, grocery stores and places where we go to without thinking. Of our 95 households, more than twenty are currently dealing with health issues of their own or of close family members. In the past year it's seemed that when one pastoral need is taken care of, another arises. Their need to see the face of Christ through members of their church family is urgent and ongoing. And, I might add, much more than one or two people can take care of.

In the past, I've spoken to you about our need for a structured program of pastoral care. In January we'll begin talking with folks who want to become trained Stephen Ministers, people who will commit not only to extensive training, but also to become a pastoral caregiver by spending an hour a week with someone who is experiencing a chronic or long-term illness or a family crisis. In addition, we'll be inviting the rest of you to become caring members of our congregation, to help out with things like transportation, grocery shopping, occasional errands, and just keeping an eye out for each other. Please begin praying about how you may become the hands and feet of Christ to members of our parish who need his love and mercy and grace. And, I must add, not only to those members you know personally or with whom you share ministry, but to all those in need.

As you know, there is serious financial need in Rutherford County, and I am frequently asked to assist people with rent, utilities, gas, food, and other household needs. Since November 30, 2013, I've disbursed over \$6,500 from the Rector's Discretionary Account, and approximately 40% of that was disbursed on behalf of St. Francis members. At one time that account was funded primarily from our operating budget, but that is no longer the case. In the past couple of years it's been funded solely by the contributions of some very kind St. Francis members, this past year totaling just over \$4,000. To you who have given generously, and also to you who have repaid what you received, I give you my heartfelt thanks. Unfortunately the needs have been greater than the resources and the reserves in the account have been almost depleted this year. In accordance with my Letter Agreement with St. Francis, beginning in January, the undesignated offering from one Sunday each month will go to the Rector's discretionary account, and you will be hearing more about that in the next couple of weeks.

So. What will the “next phase” of our journey in Christ look like? The answer will ultimately be determined by the Vestry, with a lot of input from you and some guidance from me, but we might look at today’s lessons as we begin to think about the answer. Mark writes about John the Baptizer, and his purpose, to “prepare the way of the Lord, [to] make his paths straight.” This year I will encourage the Vestry to spend less time managing the minutia of the parish and more time leading it, first by discerning and articulating our unique purpose and mission as the Episcopal Church in this community at this time. They will need your honest input, not in the form of criticism of the past, but as encouragement and support to lead St. Francis to fully be what Christ is calling us to be.

I want each one of you to know how much I appreciate all that you do for this parish and for God as we serve together in this place. Although there is much that is unknown about our future, the possibilities that await us are abundant, and approaching them together will bring excitement and energy into the life of our church. At convention this year, I spoke with a woman who is a member of one of our younger parishes, a church that was started about twenty-five years ago. She posed a question to our group that I’ll now pass on to you. If you could start this church all over again, what would it be like? What would you keep and what would you let go of? What new things would you want to start and how would you go about that. Let’s begin dreaming together about our future and give each other permission to do and be just what God has in mind for us here, as we continue to live together the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Borrowing from the words of Psalm 85, as we go forward, may mercy and truth meet together, and righteousness and peace kiss each other. *Amen.*