

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

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. *Amen.*

For those of you who are new to St. Francis and others who may have forgotten, today is the occasion of our Annual Parish Meeting, the one day of the year that we come together as a parish to look back over the previous year and look forward to what's ahead. When we gather later today for potluck and fellowship, we'll elect new vestry members, receive reports of various ministries and review our budget for 2016. This is an important way for us to connect with our church and each other beyond Sunday morning worship and committee meetings and passing in the parking lot. We're required by the Canons of the Episcopal Church to do this, and I'm required to give you a report. So, for the third year, I'm doing that from the pulpit, mixing my report in with the sermon for the day. Some of you might say you're getting the worst part of it out the way while you're held captive here. So if you're not planning to come to potluck and the meeting, please reconsider. And know that last year's meeting lasted only 20 minutes, start to finish, a record, I believe.

In Paul's letter to the Philippians, he writes, "I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ." God has certainly begun a good work among you here! Welcome Table, the ecumenical ministry shared by the people of God of different denominations in Rutherfordton has filled a need in our neighborhood in an incomparable way, feeding the hungry and creating community among them once each week. It's been a joy to watch this ministry evolve and to see it become such an important part of our parish life. Our guests love our food—especially the meat loaf—and most months there are more meals served on St. Francis' Mondays than any other week. What's equally important, I believe, is the level of participation from our parishioners, month in and month out, as you contribute and prepare food, serve it—often wearing the ugliest fuzzy hats I've ever seen—and afterward clean up so efficiently that our hosts at First Methodist can walk in and use their kitchen without having to do another thing to it. You have fun together, and people notice that!

Our Annual St. Francis Thanksgiving Luncheon just celebrated its fifth year with the largest number of meals ever served. It's my understanding that the number of meals served in-house has grown, and that means you are providing a place of community for people to gather and have fellowship around a holiday when that's important. The organizers of this luncheon are committed to what they do, and they're also committed to intentionally include every St. Francis household, as you know because you all received phone calls asking you to bring food. Like Welcome Table, this makes a significant impact on our community, and came to be through your vision and commitment.

This week there's been a steady parade of gift bags coming through the Parish House doors in preparation for next weekend's Angel Tree party. Angel Tree began at St. Francis some years ago, and like Welcome Table and the Community Thanksgiving Luncheon, has grown in both scope and reach. It serves an often overlooked segment of our community, the children of incarcerated parents, and honors those who care for them. These are among the "orphans and widows" of our day, and there are no winners in their situation. Like our other outreach ministries, everyone at St. Francis is invited to be part of this ministry and many of you do participate. This year, there were more people who wanted to bring gifts than we had names for—how wonderful is that! What I see and experience through Angel Tree are your joy and generosity, two ingredients are that critical to effective ministry.

Each of these ministries—Welcome Table, the Community Thanksgiving Luncheon, Angel Tree—help define who we are as the Parish of St. Francis, both to ourselves and to our community. There are other areas of our parish life that also define us through ministry and activities outside the walls of our buildings: The prison ministry of the Brotherhood of St. Andrew, our excellent Day School, the work of the Daughters of the King, the youth of EPIC, and as I've learned through the years, the many ways that you as individual members of St. Francis contribute in important ways to the larger community of Rutherford County. Inside St. Francis, we're held together through our Christian formation offerings, including the Joe Middleton Group and Education for Ministry, our worship and the beautiful music of our choir, food ministry to families who are impacted by illness and grief, through the quiet pastoral ministry of members caring for members, and in countless other activities, especially those that bring us together for fellowship as a community.

Overseeing all of these ministries and activities are the members of your vestry, who are elected **by you** to serve three years taking care of the church's business; which is, in the long run, **your** business. I am most thankful for them and their work, as they use their gifts and experience, not only in making decisions that affect the parish as a whole, but also to be examples of Christian leadership within our parish. For a number of years, our vestry and our parish life have been organized under a model called SWEEPS, an acronym for Stewardship, Worship, Evangelism, Education, Parish Life, and Service. Under SWEEPS, vestry members are liaisons and overseers to activities in each of those particular areas. It is a very structured, well-defined model for organization which unfortunately hasn't had a lot of "buy-in" from either the vestry or the parish. In 2016, we'll be looking at other models to find one that is more effective for the needs of our parish today, one that will encourage and allow more participation and leadership from others at St. Francis and will shift the vestry's responsibilities away from the day-to-day work of the parish and allow them to spend more time on planning and visioning than they are currently able to do. This is important for a number of reasons, and all of those reasons involve the stewardship of our resources—of everything that God has gifted to us here at St. Francis.

Early in 2016, the vestry will gather to create a set of norms, a defined understanding of how we interact with and respond to one another. This will not be a set of rules like turning off your cell phones during the meeting or being on time; instead, we'll create a covenant with one another to guide our interactions with each other, both when we agree and when we disagree. In our culture, we have adopted an attitude that polarizes us when we disagree. We cannot allow the church to follow that example, so we're being proactive in creating an environment that will encourage respect and insist on forgiveness. My hope is that once the vestry creates this covenant, it will become a standard of behavior for all of us at St. Francis.

As we all know, our buildings are aging, and the cost of maintenance and repair is increasing. We never know what's going to break or how much it will cost to fix it. Last year, we replaced the roof of the Parish House, a significant but necessary expense. There are many other items that need attention in that building. Some of the work is cosmetic, like paint and carpet, but others are structural, like the replacement of doors and windows. At some point these things will have to be tended to, and making those plans will be the work of the vestry.

For the past four-plus years, the vestry has been talking about what to do about the rectory, the beautiful but old (old!) house that has been situated next to the church since the 1930s. The siding on the exterior of the house has deteriorated past any fix-up paint could give it. There's a lot of rotten wood, the shed is barely standing, and there are numerous other issues which I will not take up your time talking about. In addition, termite damage is evident in a number of places, including the support beam which runs under the house. In 2012, several estimates were obtained to repair and correct these things, all of which came back in the neighborhood of \$75-\$80,000, not including repair of the support beam. An appraisal of the property showed its value to be around \$125,000, little more than the estimated cost of repairs. Last year a vestry-commissioned committee recommended that the rectory be torn down. At our meeting last month, the Vestry affirmed that recommendation. Please know that I will not be put out on the street! This will not be a quick

process, as we must consider not only our parish's needs, but also the requirements and rulings of the Town of Rutherfordton's historical commission. The Vestry also agreed at its November meeting to form a committee to explore possible future uses of the rectory property, and you'll be hearing more about that in the coming months.

Another factor in the life of our parish is the river of vehicular madness that runs right through the center of our property. Yes, I am speaking of Highway 221, sometimes known as Main Street. Last week the pedestrian sign and the button for the flashing lights on the parish house side of the street were taken down by the back end of a log truck, the second time they've been destroyed in the past five weeks. Safety factors aside, this separation of our gathering and worship spaces impacts our parish life in ways that we don't pay much mind to because it's a fact of our life together. Ways to seek safety and strengthen our community life despite the geographic division is another visioning exercise for the vestry, as is how to make the church more accessible to those who are elderly and/or physically impaired.

In addition to all of these very specific vestry responsibilities, there are two others I believe are critical. One is to encourage and empower and enable you to engage in the ministries to which God has called you. Although there are times when we don't do that well, it is fulfilling to the vestry members and to me to hear about your work and the impact it has on those around us. The other task ahead off the vestry is to understand and embrace God's call to the church of St. Francis. That includes keeping our eyes focused on Christ's great commission, redefining our parish's mission, and implementing plans to do and be what Christ calls us to do and be. In words I shared with you previously from the director of Lake Logan, if you aim at nothing you'll hit it every time, and sometimes it appears that we are shooting arrows into outer space. While the Spirit leads us to be spontaneous and open in our sharing of the Gospel, that isn't easy for most of us, and it's up to our church to give us the formation and to present us with opportunities to be our Lord's hands and feet in the world. With every passing day in our crazy world, many of us say things like "this has got to stop" and "something has to change, something must be done," but we don't really know how to go about it. As Christians, we have both an obligation and a responsibility to be voices of reason and instruments of change and peace. The church, the gathering of faithful people, is where the conversations must take place and where the action must begin. At St. Francis, we must remember that we are the church, and somehow we must be the voice of one crying out in the wilderness.

Today we hear the words of the prophets, in both our Old Testament lesson *and* in our Gospel lesson from Luke. The Prophet Malachi, whose name means "messenger of God," tells us that the Lord whom we seek will suddenly come to his temple, like a refiner's fire and fuller's soap, or as Eugene Peterson says in *The Message*, like "white-hot fire from the smelter's furnace," and "the strongest lye soap at the laundry." The Prophet Isaiah, whose familiar words are quoted in today's passage from Luke, calls *us* to prepare for God's arrival; tells *us* to make the road smooth and straight, to fill in the potholes, to pave over the ruts, to make it easier for *everyone* to see God's salvation.

In Advent, we focus on preparation. That's the meaning of the season, of course, but then we move—very quickly, it seems—from preparation into celebration and then right back to normal, whatever that means. That's the nature of our lives these days; we don't allow ourselves much time to hope or dream or imagine or even just to commune with God. Without hopes and dreams and imaginations, we lose our energy and passion to be anything more than we are right at this minute. Surely that's not what God desires for us; certainly it isn't what our Lord Jesus Christ expects from his church, the church that came to be through the work of the Holy Spirit, who brought together people with no common bond except the love our Lord. As Robert Malm said, "Getting ready, preparing for Christ in the season of Advent, has little to do with all we want to do to celebrate Christmas. Getting ready, preparing for Jesus, means taking the Baptist's words to heart. It also means to take the example of his life and live our lives accordingly." Adding to that, I would say

that we must not consider the church to be our destination, but rather a place where we can receive rest and refreshment on the *way* to our destination.

It is my honor and privilege to serve Christ as Rector of St. Francis, to walk with you on the journey, to share in your joys and your griefs and struggles and for you to share in mine. None of us can know what tomorrow will bring, but God has made it clear to me that there is still work for us to do together. So, borrowing Paul's words, this is my prayer, that our love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help us to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ we may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God." *Amen.*