

Sermon Proper 29, Last Sunday in Pentecost
Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24
Psalm 100
Ephesians 1:15-23
Matthew 25:31-46
November 20, 2011
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We heard perhaps my favorite line of the Apostle Paul in today's lesson. "So that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you." I relish in this phrase because I believe it cogently expresses the Christian hope and belief. Faith opens our eyes, not just to the outside world, but also the eyes of our heart at the core of our being, the place where we are fully known. And then with our heart's vision clear we may see the hope to which God calls us. To be a disciple of Jesus Christ is to have our will aligned with God's will. Discipleship is living into the hope to which God calls us.

Some of God's hope is clearly expressed by Jesus in the 25th chapter of Matthew's gospel. Today is the climax of the church year, the Feast of Christ the King. This is the church's New Year's Eve as it were. On this final Sunday of the church year, we have scheduled our annual meeting between the services this morning to close out our year. This sermon will serve as my annual report.

At an outreach gathering last week, someone remarked on what my email inbox must look like. They said that because on every email they receive and all the responses my name is on the cc line. Well, I can assure you that I am included on many emails, and I prefer it. I actually love that because it is one way that I can be in touch with the pulse of St. John's. One way to know what is happening. And a lot is happening.

Today we celebrate not just the end of an ordinary year, but of our Centennial Year. Each month we have creatively celebrated this historic passage in our church's life. As we look back at our Centennial celebration, and my first year at St. John's, what markers or sign posts might we use to value our work together? We could start with Paul's beautiful phrase, "So that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you." Or we could start with Jesus' vivid description of the final judgment when Jesus with all the angels comes in glory. Or we could use our condensed mission statement, "Sharing Christ's Love."

Now some have told me that our mission statement is too general, too all encompassing. There may be some truth to that. But ultimately, as disciples of Jesus that is what we are called to do. We are called to go out into the world to "love and serve the Lord" as we say on Sunday's as we depart from worship. Worship in community informs us, educates us, and transforms us into disciples of Jesus. And from there we are sent forth. We are the hands and feet of Christ in the world today. If we share the love of Jesus, I believe we will be addressing the concerns of Matt. 25.

The story of judgment at Jesus' second coming has always been a little threatening for me. I have always been caught short by the phrase, "in prison and you visited me." I did not see myself as one who visited those in prison. Early in my ministry a parishioner came to visit me. He wanted to tell me how much he valued the rector before me. He valued him because when this man was in jail, the rector visited him. He said, "not everyone thought Gary was the best rector in the world, but I did. He saved my life, and he saved my marriage. His visits made all the difference." I did not know that I would have many opportunities to visit jail, but I was wrong. Shortly after his visit, I learned that even Episcopalians can end up in jail and I found myself visiting frequently.

Looking at the judgment scene that Jesus describes, the final judgment seems to be a group experience. I imagine that means that we will all be gathered together at the resurrection. And we will stand arm in arm. The pronouns are plural, you and we. When did we see you Jesus?

You see the profound part of living the Christian faith is that in living the faith we actually come to see Jesus. It is when we extend our hands in love that we discover Jesus reaching out to touch us in return. Now I do not know all the ways that you have been responding to Jesus this year but I will share a few insights. You be the judge.

Jesus' first call is to act on the most basic human needs for food and drink. You participate in this every Sunday that you bring a food item for the Rivermont Food Pantry. Or if you volunteer at Lynchburg Grows. There we grow organic vegetables and we take the first fruits to Daily Bread, the daily feeding ministry that many of you participate in. When the gardens are especially productive we sell the excess produce from our greenhouse at our summer's Farmers Market. The proceeds then go to Backpacks for Life, to feed hungry students on the weekend. This year at Lynchburg Grows, you have harvested over 8300 lbs of produce, including 60 lbs of tomatoes this week. But we participate in many other opportunities to feed those who are hungry. Just last Thursday, you served Thanksgiving dinner at the Yoder Center. There we met Isaac, who two years ago was just learning to play chopsticks on the piano. As we cleaned up after dinner, Isaac played hymns from memory. We also visited with Katie, the youngest of six children and the first to graduate high school. Katie told us of her studies in nursing school thanks to the scholarship she received with the help of folks at St. John's. The Yoder Center's matriarch, Mrs. Joyce King commented afterwards, "you not only cook and serve but you also clean up as well." Still others of you feed the hungry when you cook and serve the clients at the Gateway and then dignify them by sitting and sharing dinner listening to their stories. Jesus said, "I am among you as one who serves." You truly know how to serve.

The second call is for those who are thirsty. But drink is a two edged sword as we know so well in our society. Too much can ruin lives as those of you who volunteer at Miriam's House, or Daily Bread, or Salvation Army, or Churches United for Mission, or Interfaith Outreach Association, or the Gateway can attest. One of St. John's most enduring commitments to sharing Christ's love occurs in our sponsorship of the A/A House. The back of the home is the Youth House and the yard is a playground for the SJDS. But the A/A house hosts 10 meetings per week for people in recovery from alcohol and drug addiction. That work is nothing short of life saving. For some time you have wanted to restore the A/A building but other priorities came first. Finally, under the leadership of Alan Williamson and Kevin Hooper with the support of the Outreach and Mission Relations Committees this restoration project is coming to fruition. You can see the progress across the street at 201 Boston Ave.

"I was a stranger and you welcomed me." We do that through the recovery programs that we host. Or by our greeters during worship. Or as we worked last year with Rebuilding Together, Lynchburg on our Mission Lynchburg week working on homes in Tinbridge Hill. There we discovered that we were the stranger and yet we were graciously welcomed. Friendships formed, bridges of hope are built.

"Or sick and you visited." We do this in pastoral care of those who are ill or shut in or when we sit with the bereaved. We also welcome the newest parents in our community. We provide casseroles and even drivers to doctor's appointments, or someone to sit with at the hospital, or after surgery. Much of our pastoral care ministry is behind the scenes, but Diane and I see what you are doing. We see how you are supporting one another. Sharing Christ's love.

"I was naked and you clothed me." In three weeks, on December 11 we will hold a Day of Caring to restock the Amherst Thrift Shop which was damaged by fire this fall. We will collect winter clothes (not summer) along with other thrift shop items at both services that Sunday. That afternoon they will be delivered by the Outreach Committee to the thrift shop, a 20 year ministry of Ascension, Amherst and St. Mark's, Clifford.

Here at St. John's our task is to be a place of welcome, discovery, and discipleship training. This happens in liturgy and in music, as our Psalm called us to, "Be joyful in the Lord and come before his presence with a song." We know something about praising God in worship.

Discipleship is learned in Christian formation for all ages. As we come together week after week we learn of opportunities to serve whether in teaching here or in classes for all ages and expertise. From childhood to youth to adults, opportunities for formation and learning abound. We learn in Sunday school or vacation bible school or at SJDS or confirmation classes for teens and adults, or in our Sunday forum. There are even special opportunities such as “Somehow Let’s Make a Family” our parenting program which meets on Sunday evenings at 5:30 p.m.

But we don’t just teach ourselves. You teach others. Tutoring at the Yoder Center and at schools throughout the city. Education is the key to a future of opportunity.

Education leads to mission and outreach, in our community through Habitat for Humanity, Rebuilding Lynchburg and others. And to the world, through Child Reach Africa or our mission trips to Holy Cross Anglican School in Belize. We are working to make life abundant and available to all.

Perhaps the comments about our mission statement, of sharing Christ’s love, are correct. Maybe our mission statement is too broad. But apparently the eyes of our hearts have been enlightened and we truly have found the hope to which God has called us.

Have I seen all that you do, no, I suspect that I have seen only a portion of your work in sharing Christ’s love. But your ministry has changed me and I share the thought of St. Paul.

As St. Paul said so clearly, “I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers.”