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The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd; Austin, Texas
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At the very start of Mark's gospel, the first Gospel to be written down, Jesus begins his public ministry by telling folks to repent – that's the translation we often hear – but repent has a kind of particularized religious meaning for us today, it's something like “feel bad about stuff that you've done wrong and don't do it again” – although that's not a technical translation. It would be more accurate to say that in Jesus' day it meant something more like “go beyond the mind you have.”¹ The very first thing Jesus says in his public ministry in the first gospel to be written down is “go beyond the mind you have.” Come to see the world and your place in it differently than you otherwise would.

And it's a useful reminder to us that our mission is expansive, that our mission as Christians starts with an expansive and fresh perspective, one that doesn't come just from the culture around us but one that comes from something beyond just us. A reminder that our mission requires us to dream big and to dream with a fresh perspective in every new time.

We're starting our stewardship season today, and what I like about stewardship is that it calls us to think about our core mission and to recommit ourselves to that mission. To think about what one author calls “the dream of God” and to recommit ourselves to that dream.²

It is a dream expressed in the words of the Isaiah that “every tear shall be wiped away.” The dream told 2700 years ago by the prophet Amos that “justice shall roll down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream.” The dream imagined by St. Paul that there is no Jew or Gentile in God; we're all one. The dream lived by Jesus – the dream that loving our neighbors as ourselves will be the cornerstone of our values, the dream that the last shall be first, the outcast included, that we'll experience love for each other that is for us a window to the Holy.

It's up to us to make it so. Up to us to support communities that make this dream real. Up to us to invest our time and our money to make this our dream too.

It's a mission that is at once particular to us – to this parish and to you and me – and it is universal. It is as particular as today – October 15, 2017 – and it is as old as time: to connect to something bigger than ourselves, to translate our values into action, to know something of the Holy, of the Eternal. To know ourselves and all of our moments – the ones where we are filled with joy and the ones where we are weighed down with pain – to know that all of our moments are bound together and blessed.

Over the next few weeks our parish leadership will ask you to recommit to our mission for 2018. Your pledges over the next few weeks will determine the scope and breadth of our mission for 2018. Your financial commitment to this place reflects the fact that you see yourself as part of something bigger than just you. Part of a community dedicated to following the call of God.

In 2018 your pledges will support the opening of the Hillside Early Childhood Center. You will be part of offering affordable quality childcare and early childhood education to our neighbors on The Hill. For some of the children Hillside services, it will change the rest of their lives. It reflects the breadth of our mission, and we're doing it because we believe that it's God's call to us.

¹ See *Speaking Christian* by Marcus Borg, page 158-9.

² See *The God We Never Knew* by Marcus Borg, chapter 6.

In 2018 your pledges will support our formation offerings, both on Sunday morning and throughout the week. It's hard to know how to read scripture and make sense of what it means for us – it takes history and context and it takes hearing others' experience and perspective – and that happens nearly every day of the week in these buildings. It's the way we connect the timeless call of the Bible to the lives that we live today. And it's God's call to us.

Last year we baptized more people in this parish than nearly any other Episcopal Church, and your pledges will let us do that same thing in 2018. In the words of the liturgy, we'll bring into God's fellowship those who come to him in faith baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit so that they are reborn into a community that will love them no matter what happens to them, a love that perhaps for them will be a window to the Holy when they most need it. It's what we want the very most for our kids, and it's God's call to us.

We perform many weddings and burials in this place. Our last was less than 24 hours ago. It's an incredible honor to be with people at the heights of joy and to be with family members of those who have died, some of whom are not sure how they will continue – we get to show them that this place cares about them, that they're not alone. It takes lots of staff people and volunteers to make that happen. Your gifts of time and money make it possible, and we do it because it's God's call to us.

Since last summer we've had a worshipping congregation at The Hill in east Austin. It's a commitment for us to spend time and money there. For us, it reflects our belief that God calls people in every part of our city. We're committed to The Hill because we believe that it's God's call to us.

Since August we have mobilized to help our sisters and brothers to the east of us who have been affected by Hurricane Harvey. The need of folks in our diocese will be just as great – maybe even greater – after the TV cameras have left. And we'll be there to help in 2018 and beyond. It's God's holy call to us.

Paul wrote 1950 years ago, when this Christian experiment was brand new. He'd had a vision of Christ that re-ordered his life, and his vision grew into a dream of a re-ordered world. He saw communities of love where people of different backgrounds – people from different starting places, Jews and Gentiles – experienced a connection to the divine. And this connection, for Paul, wasn't something that could be earned. It was simply a gift from God.

“For I am convinced,” Paul writes, “that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”³

It's a beautiful vision, and for was an experiment. Could these new communities of Jesus followers sustain themselves over time? Could they continue to live out their values of love and forgiveness? Could they open their doors and their hearts to everyone – Jew and Gentile – in a way that other religious groups of the time did not?

We stand on some big shoulders. That was the experiment of 1950 years ago. And now, it's our turn. To support the mission to which we are called in our time and in our place.

Your pledge represents your promise to be part of this mission. By our pledges, we become partners in God's work here. The standard of our giving, the standard of our partnership with God, should reflect our standard of living. We seek to give our best, not just what we have leftover or what's easy. Thanks be to God, Austin is not a city of leftovers. This is a growing, vital place and it gives us extraordinary opportunities and privileges.

³ Romans 8:38-39.

We don't pledge to keep the church lights on or to keep the buildings open; we pledge because God calls us to be part of a bigger mission, an expansive mission. A mission that reflects the best of the values that we hold and the best of what we have to offer.

Why are you a Christian? Why is this community important to you?

For me, it's because I believe that there's more to life than just what we can see and touch. I know in my soul that we're connected to each other in ways that I don't understand but that I know exist. I feel a call to something more than what the culture around me offers – a call that says real life happens on a deeper plane where what matters is love and connection. Not the kind that's cheap or sentimental, but the kind that can hold the height of joy and the depth of pain and can hold even still. A deeper plane where we understand ourselves to be connected in a mission that is older than we can imagine and that is as new and fresh as today. A mission that requires our best.

I invite you to recommit to the mission that we share.