

The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

January 29, 2017

Annual Parish Meeting, Matthew 5:1-12

“For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but, to us who are being saved, it is the power of God” (1 Corinthians 1:18).

Blessed be the name of God, *Amen*.

Our national and Episcopal identities intersect in Washington’s National Cathedral, and, last weekend, that intersection prompted controversy. Dean Randy Hollerith consented to the Cathedral choir’s participation in the Inauguration’s prelude and allowed the Cathedral sanctuary to host for the new President an interfaith prayer service on the following Saturday morning. Of his recent decisions – which already seem a lifetime ago – Dean Hollerith writes:

“I understand the strong disagreement many people have...[and] I am sorry those decisions have caused such turmoil and pain. Yet I stand by those decisions — not because we are celebrating the President-elect, but because we want to model for him, and [for] the rest of the country, an approach to civility.

“Understand that civility does not mean endorsing a president’s views, behavior or rhetoric, nor compromising our own Christian values. Our willingness to pray and sing with everyone today does not mean we won’t join with others in protest tomorrow. We will always strive to bridge the divide and repair the breaches in our life together”...*We will always strive to bridge the divide and repair the breaches in our life together.*

As a Christian of this Episcopal tradition, I take considerable heart in Dean Hollerith’s leadership and vision for our Church’s charge.

These disagreements do, however, demonstrate our blessings and burdens as inheritors of **place**: the place *of* Good Shepherd and The Episcopal Church – that is, our physical locations, the sorts and conditions of our sanctuaries; and, then, our place *for* the community – that is, the public responsibility of our parish and Church as the Body of Christ in the world.

Of the former, realize that as far as we are from D.C...we are not so very far. While Dean Hollerith still served as Rector of Saint James in Richmond, Virginia, he was here touring Good Shepherd just last February, when we hosted a best-practices exchange for leaders of The Episcopal Church’s largest congregations. Further, whenever we at Good Shepherd – or the faithful of Saint John’s-Lafayette Square, or of Saint Margaret’s-Little Rock, or of Holy Nativity-Hong Kong – gather for the Eucharist, we share a **common** place with the apostles and saints across time, not only those in distant ages, but those walking with us now. See, every Episcopal pulpit is *God’s* pulpit, and every Episcopal altar is *God’s* altar, and every time one parish gathers in prayer, we are all there – *together* – made one “in the mystery of the union between Christ and his Church.”

Therefore, I remind you of what you already know: *this place is important...this place is important*. In a world increasingly ignorant and even antagonistic to ideas of God and the ground we set aside for inspiration, we have invested our blood and our bones, our first fruits and our best hopes, in the rebuilding of *this* holy place. Thanks be to God, with the cooperation of the Holy Spirit, we *have* sturdied its foundation, and truly **renewed** this first home of our worship. See, we did not *replace* the pews; rather, we had every one disassembled, stripped, repaired, restained, refitted, reassembled, and reinstalled. Likewise, we did not *replace* our stained glass; rather, we had every piece, of every window, hand-washed; every section, reframed; and every panel, protected with a new pane. We did the same with the pendant lights, with the aisle doors, with the dorsal curtains, and on, and on, and on, and we did so because we believe in the power of *this place*: its history – to which we bind ourselves – and its future – for which we aspire – as an enduring sanctuary for the prophets’ word and the penitents’ prayers. No matter the world’s condition, we find our center and our strength in the constancy of this home, and by making *it* stronger and more beautiful, we have made stronger and more beautiful Christ’s *whole Church* throughout the world.

As faithfully as we have labored to renew this place, we have labored in love to widen its doors and share its sanctuary with many new neighbors through the ministries of Communion Café and Good Shepherd on The Hill.

[Now, for everyone who has visited The Hill, I’m going to ask for an ‘Amen’...C’mon now, Hill-raisers, lemme hear you: Can I get an ‘Amen?’]

[and everyone who has worshipped in Communion Café, can I get an ‘Amen’?]

Thanks be to God, our Average Sunday Attendance in Communion Café nearly doubled from 2015 to 2016: from 54, to 101...and, now that we have moved that service to a larger, better appointed place, we have averaged 150 these first three weeks in the Parish Life Center.

And at this time last year?...well, there was *no* Sunday worshipping community at 1700 Woodland Avenue. After years of construction and planning, tilling and sowing, from The Hill’s April launch through its Christmas Eve, candlelit singing of “Silent Night,” its 2016 Average Sunday Attendance was 50. Consider that it took us *six years* to reach that number in Communion Café, a threshold The Hill has achieved in six *months*.

Altogether, we have averaged 634 good souls (well, *mostly* good souls) in worship every Sunday, a more than 10% increase over the year before. While – of course! – these metrics are not perfect, and we still have work to do (you know, pew racks would sure be nice in here, and that kitchen at The Hill will be wonderful...just as soon as we finish it), nonetheless, on this Sunday of the Annual Parish Meeting we do well to celebrate the faithful ministry already undertaken to share and make a faith home, *together*. And every time one of these congregations gathers in prayer – whether accompanied by an organ’s pipes or a guitar’s strings – we are *all* there.

Of our place *for* the community, these physical spaces play a role in the public responsibilities of the Church: not so adored as to be guarded...nor so ordinary as to be unappreciated...but so honored as to be stewarded, thoughtfully and faithfully. For at that altar we share God's gifts; and on these steps, we announce God's Good News; and, from this pulpit, we endeavor to speak God's truth...and with the cooperation of the Holy Spirit, these devotions nurture a fellowship modeling the beloved community our God hopes for the whole world...modeling *here*, what God wants *everywhere*. In a place of such holiness and dignity, we – in love! – mind our manners and offer our very best to God and to one another. And just as sturding this building's foundation demanded our blood and our bone, so, too, will the ongoing renewal of our world require Good Shepherd's sacrifice and risk.

In this morning's familiar appointment, Jesus makes clear that popularity with the powerful is not our task as disciples: "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. [And blessed are *you*] when people revile and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven" (Matthew 5:11-13).

Indeed, while we do not seek to be antagonistic for antagonism's sake, we will accept difficulty – even persecution – should such suffering follow faithfulness. And if, truly, we choose the message and ministry of Jesus as our model, then such trials should neither surprise nor dissuade us.

For no matter what the world persuades, we believe that in our serving *even one* who mourns, *all* the grieving will be comforted;

we believe that in our standing with the poor and the meek – even one! – then *all* those in need will be benefited;

we believe that in modeling community and humility, God will give us strength – join us in sowing mercy – and civility *will be* restored;

we believe that in laboring for peace, God's peace will be realized in our lives and in all the communities of the world...

...and though this "Peace that passes all understanding" will not be fulfilled tomorrow, we take heart that whenever one of us marches or sings; wherever one of us serves the hurting or seeks the truth; we are all there *together*: made one "in the mystery of the union between Christ and his Church." As the Daughters of the King give voice to this devotion, "We are but one, but we *are* one[, and though we] cannot do *everything*, we can do *something*," and we believe that God will bless our faithfulness.

We choose this vulnerable posture and take these faithful actions, not because the work is easy, but because the mission is *righteous* – see: this is the wisdom of God and the foolishness of the world, that in every place of disagreement and division within our community and within our world, we will love...more, and better, and always. No matter the world's condition, we will find our center and our strength in the constancy of our Good Shepherd, trusting that by making stronger and more beautiful this fellowship, we will make stronger and more beautiful the whole world.

Amen.