

## **Epiphany 4C 2016 Sermon Annual Meeting**

January 31, 2016

ANNUAL MEETING SUNDAY

### ***Jeremiah 1:4-5***

*The word of the Lord came to me saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations."*

### ***Luke 4:21-30***

*In the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus read from the book of the prophet Isaiah, and began to say, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" He said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'" And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.*

Our Annual Meeting is taking place today in the context of our Eucharist – there will not be a dismissal following our final hymn. We will take a very brief 5-minute break to stretch and use the restroom, but then we will reconvene in these pews. Only after the business part of our Annual Meeting and the final hymn will I give the dismissal as a sign that our Eucharist is over.

One of the things we do at our Annual Meeting is receive reports – reports from the Rector, Sr. and Jr. Warden, ECW, Altar Guild, Treasurer, committees, etc. Such reports can help tell the story of our life as a parish family in communion and ministry together. I encourage you to take the Annual Meeting booklets (which you will be given later) home with you, and spend some time thoughtfully and prayerfully *reading* the reports. In a very real sense, these reports are symbolic, sacramental “offerings” of our ministries to God. They represent some (though not all!) of the many important activities and ministries that take place in and through Christ Church. Perhaps in these written reports you will read about a ministry that *you* feel called to; perhaps you will feel moved to thank the people who perform all of these ministries; or perhaps reading a report will cause a fire

to be lit in your heart about a ministry you think that **you** individually, or our parish family corporately, might possibly start!

I believe that a close examination of our life together as the Body of Christ in this place will reflect a vitality and variety of ministries performed with deep faithfulness. It is important to remember, however, that there is a crucial dimension of our life together which *cannot* be contained in a written report – namely, the *spiritual* life that undergirds all of our ministries. If the ministries we perform – and about which we report – are not carried out in the spirit of Christ, if they are not enlivened by divine love, forgiveness, compassion, and the Holy Spirit of God, then we are no different from the Rotary Club or some other service organization which does wonderful community service and creates fellowship but does not draw its very purpose and lifeblood from the Holy Spirit of God. Therefore, *central* to our life together is the ongoing spiritual formation and *transformation* of each **part** of this body (each one of us), and of this body as a corporate whole (as St. Paul spoke of in our Epistle last week). The spiritual reality at the heart of our life together involves the faithfulness and prayerfulness of each of you; but even more importantly, it recognizes – and is open to – the faithfulness of **God** moving among us and through us, calling us to be all we are created and empowered to be.

In our Old Testament reading today, God tells Jeremiah, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I gave you as a prophet to the nations...” God performs God’s own appointed ministry in and through Jeremiah; and God performs the ministries to which we are called in and through us, *as* we are open to the Holy Spirit moving, transforming, and acting in our lives.

I received an email devotional on Friday which could not have been more timely, for it speaks to us today as we gather in Annual Meeting. It is a quote from Henri Nouwen, and it regards the essential interplay between deepening formation and transformation of our spiritual lives and Jesus’ call to compassionate action in our world. Nouwen writes:

Prayer and action, therefore, can never be seen as contradictory or mutually exclusive. Prayer *without* action grows into powerless pietism, and action without prayer degenerates into questionable manipulation. If prayer leads us into a deeper unity with the compassionate Christ, it will **always** give rise to concrete acts of service. And if concrete acts of service do indeed lead us to a deeper solidarity with the poor, the hungry, the sick, the dying, and the oppressed, they will **always** give rise to prayer. In prayer we meet Christ, and in him all human suffering. In service we meet people, and in them the suffering Christ.

[Henri J. M. Nouwen (1932-1996), *Compassion*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1982, Random House, 2005, p. 117-118]

“Before you were born,” God tells Jeremiah, “I gave you as a prophet to the nations.” The translator of *The Message Bible*, Eugene Peterson, writes, “...generosity is God’s nature, and He gives **us** *for* others. He makes no exception. **All** of us are given by God *for* others.”\* *God* is not a part of **our** story, therefore; *we* are a part of **God’s** story. God tells **us** – both individually and as the Body of Christ which we collectively are – “I gave **you** as \_\_\_\_\_ to the nations.” How do we fill in that blank? God may not have given us to be *prophets* to the nations, as with Jeremiah; but God **does** give us as *some* gift to the nations. What is it? We will engage in some discernment in our meeting today. And who **is** “the nations”? The word our Bible translates as “the nations” literally meant “anyone *not* a Jew.” We might rephrase it as “anyone who **isn’t** one of us”. Anyone who is **not** part of our crowd – our friends, our age group, our nationality, our political persuasion, our denomination, our religion, our club, our social class. Like Jeremiah, God has given *us* as a gift to “the nations” – to those who are **not** “one of us”. Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple said, “The Church is the only society that exists for the benefit of those who are not its members.”

That’s also one of the key messages of our Gospel today – that Jesus is not accepted by his *own* crowd. In fact, Jesus infuriates his hometown folk – all of them sons and daughters of Israel – by pointing out that while there were many widows in Israel in Old Testament times, the prophet Elijah was not sent to **any** of the *Israelite* widows; rather, he was sent to a widow from a **foreign** nation. And though there were many *lepers* in Israel in Old Testament times, the *only* one which the prophet Elisha cleansed was the *commander* of the **enemy** army of Syria, which had just conquered Israel! – Naaman, a Syrian, just like those thousands of Syrian refugees fleeing their war-torn country today.

In his recent book *The Name of God Is Mercy*, Pope Francis writes,  
 The Church does not exist to condemn people,  
 but to bring about an encounter with the visceral love of God’s mercy...  
 in order for this to happen, it is necessary to **go out**:  
 to **go out** from the churches and the parishes,  
 to go outside and look for people  
 where they live, where they suffer, and where they hope.

I believe God is telling us today, “I appointed you, members of Christ Church, as a gift to the nations – to those **outside** these walls.” Those who are *not* us. My friends, I believe that we are closer to hearing and discerning that call than we have ever been, and I am very excited and humbled about that! We are deepening in our spiritual lives, and with that formation and transformation, as Henri Nouwen stated, comes a greater clarity regarding God’s call to action beyond these walls.

At our Annual Parish Meeting, therefore, we not only report to the congregation, we report to God – report for duty. For *God* is not part of **our** story; *we* are part of God's story – a far greater Story than we could ever imagine.

AMEN

\*Eugene H. Peterson, "Before," *Run with the Horses: The Quest for Life at Its Best* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1983), pp. 33-44