

A Voice in the Wilderness

THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST



OCTOBER 2007

After a very busy September, our own schedule gets into the spirit of mud season and slows down dramatically. There are only two special events, one regarding our relationship to the wider church and the other regarding the financial side of our life together in our own parish.

Friday and Saturday, the 5th and 6th your clergy and lay representatives will represent you at the annual Diocesan Convention at the Cathedral in Denver. Please pray for our diocese and its ministries.

Sundays the 14th and 21st mark our annual Financial Stewardship Pledge Drive. See Rector's Page for details.

Finally, an early heads-up that on Friday evening at 6PM on November 2nd we will observe Commemoration of All Faithful Departed (All Soul's Day).

A Word from the Rector

Fall comes to the mountains and with it all the wonderful things we identify with the season—chilly mornings warming into beautiful days, beautiful shimmering aspen leaves, Rockies’ playoff games, football, and, of course, the fall stewardship pledge drive at St. John’s. All these are things to be celebrated.

Celebrate our stewardship pledge drive? Of course this is to be celebrated. All of our life together as the Body of Christ in this place is to be celebrated, and moving ahead financially is an important part of this life together. I hope very much that we succeed this year in emphasizing and making real the celebratory aspect of our common giving to support this life.

In giving to St. John’s—more specifically in pledging to give a certain amount over the next year—we make a statement. We make a statement to ourselves and to each other about how we value St. John’s and a commitment that we will support it, to keep it healthy. Of course, we need much more to make a healthy church than just financial support. But it is certainly one mark of a healthy Christian community that the people give generously and freely, out of abundance, and not carefully and grudgingly, out of a sense of perceived scarcity.

There is much to celebrate in our life together here. The values and ministries we share, the ways in which we know God both in our worship together and in each other, the good times we have, and the witness we make to how Christians can live together putting the Gospel first and our differences last. This last is something that many churches in our Anglican tradition cannot say at this time. But it is something that we can celebrate.

We can celebrate the advances in giving that we have made over the last five years. Despite losing generous parishioners every year, we have always grown in our giving. We have grown in two ways: by increasing the numbers of pledging units and by raising the average amount each unit pledges. Did you know that last year, we added 11 new pledging units? And that many renewing pledges saw significant increases? This enabled us to overcome the loss of six pledgers, including two who were able to give at an especially high level. We have an established record of generous giving that is steadily increasing. Let us celebrate this—and vow to keep up this good work.

During the month of October, you will be receiving letters and information leaflets from me and your stewardship committee. Please read them with prayerful consideration, reflect on what St. John’s means to you, and respond faithfully—appropriately to your own circumstances—to make your giving to St. John’s truly a celebration of our life together.

In celebration and with blessings for you all,

Fr. Spencer +

Notes about Ministries

New tenants moving in

Beginning October 1, St. John's will see a more consistent use of our downstairs facilities. An extension service from Middle Park High School serving disabled high school graduates will be using the downstairs common area most days from Monday thru Thursday. The aim of the program is to help disabled graduating students to make the transition to living in the community. One of the participating students is our own Eliza Rose, granddaughter to Joan and Ken Von der Heiden. The program is quite informal, so do not hesitate to drop in to say hello or to do other work in the area, should you need to do so.

St. John's, the meetingplace of choice

One of the goals to come out of the expansion of our facilities was to make our church a home for community groups needing a place to meet. Currently, the following groups use or have used St. John's space on either a regular or occasional basis: the Grand Chorale, Heart of the Mountain Hospice, Habitat for Humanity, Love and Logic (marriage workshops), P.E.O., Mountain Family Center, Grand County Social Services, The Advocates, Grand Futures, and Colorado West Regional Mental Health. Alcoholics Anonymous use the Cranmer Chapel. We have realized this goal of opening St. John's to the community quite effectively.

Your feedback

Our September 30 parish meeting to discuss stewardship was well attended, and your stewardship committee is grateful for your support and your feedback. One thing that came out of the meeting was the desire on the part of several persons to be better informed about the financial condition and activities of the parish. The vestry reminds all members that the minutes of each vestry meeting along with financial reports are posted on the bulletin board outside the kitchen doors. It was agreed that our treasurers would be encouraged to provide a summary of significant financial information in English, and not just in spreadsheets of, to some, mind-numbing numbers.

Our groundskeeping

This has been mentioned before on this page, but in light of the entirely unsolicited comments of three sets of visitors in the last month, it is worth repeating that our grounds—lawn, trees, flowers, trim, etc., have never looked better. Kudos to all the Morck family, but especially to Kathe, for the wonderful work with our landscape. It all looks truly beautiful. And if you have not done so, check out the newly developed bench and tree area on the back lawn.

Sermon of the Month

Sermon preached on Sunday, September 2

The readings this morning call for reflection on one of the least favorite of Christian virtues – humility.

Consider Jesus at the dinner party described in the Gospel reading. He sees that all the guests are playing the old familiar game that the world loves to play – the game of one-upmanship or self-promotion. The story is about putting oneself ahead at a dinner. But it could just as easily be at any other sort of party, business meeting, a game, at church, even – any human gathering at all. We've all seen it – and seen it in ourselves as well: maneuvering to put ourselves in a place of honor, making the occasion about us and our advancement in the eyes of others.

Jesus advises us rather to sit at the lowest place. But there is something odd about this advice. For one thing, if we all take it, there is a sudden mad rush for the lower tables in the back. For another, why are we told to sit at the back? So that we may be asked to move up! But this gives the game away, surely. Going to the lower tables becomes no more than a tactic, a way to be noticed so that you will be moved up to a place of honor. It is still about seeking honor. It's the same goal; it's no morally different; it's simply another, deeper, and maybe smarter, strategy. The goal is still self-promotion. The goal is still self-glorification.

The only sermon that I can remember from my high school years is about this tactic for self-promotion. My pastor was preaching about another preacher. This other preacher was citing Paul's claim that he, Paul, was the chief of sinners. The preacher begged to differ. "Paul," he said, "was wrong. Paul was not the chief of sinners; I am chief of sinners!" And my pastor asked what was going on here. Everybody, it seems, wants to be chief of sinners! What is going on, of course, is that both Paul and the preacher citing him needed to be "special." They couldn't simply be redeemed sinners along with the rest of us. They had to be the biggest sinner of all. Or perhaps

they were playing the old game; call oneself the chief of sinners so that another will come along to disagree with you, to "move you up" to a place of honor.

But surely Jesus is not telling us about a better way of glorifying ourselves. And this is actually signaled in the text. Luke says that Jesus is giving us a parable. It is not advice about getting on in this world, it is a parable of the next, a parable of the kingdom.

In the kingdom, these sorts of games will not be played.

But we live in this world now. If we are to make our lives here more like living in the kingdom, what lesson can we take from these reflections on humility. Surely Jesus is calling us in this world to humility. Not to the false humility of the "chief of sinners" story. Not to a humility that is actually about us – about putting ourselves forward for the approval of others. Humility is not about thinking less of ourselves that we really are; humility is about not thinking about ourselves that much at all because we are more involved in the other than we are ourselves. Humble people do not think that they are terrible; they tend not to think about themselves that much.

No. Jesus is calling us to a humility that accepts that everything is not about us. A humility that seeks a place at the table, not because the place will honor us, but because that place may enable us to help another. A humility that enables us to make the meeting, the dinner, the party, the church service not about us, but about the other.

I said at the beginning of this reflection that humility was one of the least favorite of the Christian virtues. But the more I think about it, and the more I read about humility, the more I think that humility is not simply one among many Christian virtues. Humility is the core Christian virtue, the source of all other virtues. And its opposite – pride – is the root of all sinfulness.

Think about it. Is there any sin that is not rooted some way in pride? What sin is not about putting oneself at the center, about thinking of oneself as more important, as better, than others? What sin is not about self-idolatry? Of the seven deadly sins, the first is pride itself. But the others — covetousness, lust, envy, gluttony, anger, and sloth — are they all not rooted in putting self at the center of our world? Putting self ahead of others, and putting self ahead of God. They are all fundamentally about self-promotion, about giving oneself pride of place — about, in short, pride. It is pride that introduces sin; it is pride that makes redemption necessary.

But if pride is the source of all sin and idolatry, what is the cure? There is only one cure — humility. If pride and sin are about putting oneself forward, then redemption is in humility — putting others at the center. So if pride is at the core of all sin, let us play the game in reverse. Can we say that humility is at the root of all virtue? Consider the three classic theological virtues: faith, hope, and charity. Faith and hope are rooted in the other — in particular, in God. It is about turning our attention away from our own resources and toward God. It is the absence of pride in our relationship to God. And charity, of course, is about putting the interest of others ahead of simply our own. It is the absence of pride in our relationship to others.

What virtue can we possibly pursue in the absence of humility? Can we be in God's presence while being full of ourselves? No. Can we practice genuine charity, if we really make it about ourselves? No, if we do this, we are merely playing the game of one-upmanship with the deeper strategy. Can we exercise justice, if we are concerned with putting ourselves forward? No. The genuinely humble person will consistently put others at the fore and will not be practicing self-promotion — and all the other virtues will fall out of this one way of orientation. It will not be about him or herself — therefore it will be about God and about others, about our neighbors.

All this is why, I believe, the author of Ecclesiasticus in our Old Testament reading says that the beginning of human pride is to forsake the Lord. Human

pride is about putting ourselves first — and this is to forsake both God and our fellow human beings. And the opposite of pride is humility, which is to put God and our fellows first, which is to love God and to love our neighbors. Jesus called these the two great commandments.

So perhaps we might even say that there is actually only one commandment — to be humble. All the rest follows from this.

Updates from the Church Family

On the mend

We are truly delighted to report that Pauline Friend is now out of the hospital and in Greenwood Village Rehabilitation Center, where she is rapidly improving and gaining strength every day. Still no date for her return home, but that light at the end of the tunnel is definitely not an oncoming train. Daughter Kathe Morck is also recovering well from her wrist surgery for carpal tunnel syndrome.

Comings and goings (mostly goings)

Joe Wetherill celebrated his 90th birthday with friends and family at his Grand Lake home on Saturday, September 22. He has now returned to Oklahoma for the winter. See you next fall, Joe! And we have just received a call from Jeannine Aberg-Maes bringing news of the Maes family and their move to Salida. Despite some homesickness, especially on the part of Alexandra, they are settling into their new life. Phil is doing well in his new position of the director of county wide health and social services programs. His staff and responsibilities are much greater than they were here. After checking out employment possibilities, Jeannine is now exploring establishing her own counseling service, as she had in Grand County. Congratulations and keep in touch, friends.

September festivities

If you were away in September, you missed a lot of good times. Our annual ice cream social with games was held on Sunday the 9th, after church. We had a big turnout of children (eleven?) for games on the front lawn next to the playground. Marilyn Orr organized games; the three-legged race was especially vigorously contested. Then on the following Friday evening, our fall music night (with house blessing) was held at the home of Jeanie and Jim Kemp in Granby. It was a gorgeous evening with good food and spirited singing. Finally, on Sunday the 16th, we celebrated the Feast Day of St. Francis (transferred from October 4, in the hope of warmer weather) and the blessing of the animals at an outdoor service on the back lawn. The weather was good, the animals got blessed, the Lord was worshiped and praised – it was a great time!

Fore!

Fr. Spencer thanks those who asked after his vacation golf week. As usual his golf game had its ups and downs, but he prevailed in all contests, primarily because he always makes sure to invite friends who golf even worse than he does.