

Rector's Report to the Parish The Annual Meeting January 18, 2009

My remarks this morning are my annual report to the parish. I will not bore you with statistical data; I will add all that to record later and it will appear in our Parochial Report in late January. But first, let me address our Gospel lesson for this Second Sunday after the Epiphany.

For a long time I didn't understand the Gospel story about Jesus seeing Nathaniel under a fig tree.¹ What in the world was that about? It didn't become clear to me until I began to understand that Nathaniel was the issue in this story, not Jesus. Nathaniel, apparently, had a problem with making snap judgments about people and places. He might have said, "Nazareth! Ugh, who would want to live there?"

I won't tell you that like Nathaniel's view of Nazareth is how I felt about Chillicothe mainly because I had never heard of Chillicothe, Missouri, and even after moving to central Missouri in 1988, I wasn't certain where Chillicothe was. I recall the first time I drove to this community. It was probably in the late summer of 1992. After driving north from Marshall, Missouri, I wondered if I would ever arrive. The highway still is narrow, hilly, and curving; don't get stuck behind big semi trucks or farm equipment. You know what that means. Nevertheless, I guess in a way I was like Nathaniel. I was ready to make a snap judgment based only on the difficulty in reaching Chillicothe by traveling up Highway 65 (or, as they say in Missouri, 65 Highway). After nearly seventeen years living and laboring here, Ann and I have come to enjoy being a part of this community. It is a progressive city rich with interesting people who are a joy to know.

Further, answering the call to come to Grace Church fulfilled for me, although I was unaware of it at the time, a long held dream to be the rector of a parish in a town just like this. I held this dream of service long before Jan Karon began to write about Father Tim Cavanaugh in her *Mitford Books*.

In the years I have been here we have lost some very good people through the natural processes of life. Further, people have come and gone because of job changes and answering their own calls to service. We have seen children grow up and enter into adult life becoming successes in their own right. I think we can all be proud of their accomplishments.

While Grace Church has remained a small congregation, we have not been insignificant. In our congregation there are and have been important members of the community who have served the public good in several capacities.

We, as a congregation, have supported the Salvation Army's efforts to aid the needy, we have given many pounds of food goods to the Green Hills Community Action Agency. During the floods of 1993 this congregation was the hub of several relief efforts in Livingston and surrounding counties. We have supported the community's "Operation Help" program. Further,

¹ This report was presented as the Sermon for the Second Sunday after Epiphany. The Gospel lesson for the Second Sunday after Epiphany (Year B, RCL) is John 1:42-51.

we have had enough resources to help people who have come to the church in need. We can only thank each of you for your generosity.

This congregation has produced two truly gifted priests of the Church. Chip and Lisa Graves have told me that Grace Church is unique in supporting them through seminary. We still have one more in the process. Cindy Barnes is also a gifted woman in whom we can take pride and we look forward to her ordination. Your generosity has made it possible to help the Graves and Cindy obtain the books needed for their studies as well as just help needed to face the rigors of theological study. We have another who aspires to ordained ministry, Rosina Harter. She is a dedicated Christian woman to whom we look forward to seeing leading a congregation of the Church some day in the near future.

I am deeply grateful to the members of the Vestry for their continuing support of the ministry of this parish. I am especially grateful to Ed Robertson for his steadfast loyalty to the mission of our parish. He has served for five years as our Senior Warden and one year as the Junior Warden. Not only is he capable in many fields of endeavor, but he is a dedicated Christian who places the ministry of our Lord above all other aspects of life.

Our capable Junior Warden, George Harter, has made an enormous difference in our life as a parish. He has made things work, fixed things broken and added new features to our physical plant that enhances our life as a parish church.

Our loyal acolytes are a true joy to me. Anna Way, who has a beautiful singing voice and stands with me at the Altar, has grown from infancy to a beautiful teenage young woman. Alex Way, who is always ready with a smile, is stalwart in his duties to serve at the Altar. Soon he will be ready to be a server and take on more responsibilities. These two children are the outcome of parents who care, and care a lot, about their church and their faith. Their mother, Georgia Way, impressed me the summer she and her, now grown, daughters Brook and Abby went to camp with me down near Lebanon, Missouri. Georgia was designated the "Camp Mom". She was responsible for the health of the campers; a duty she took very seriously. If she had joined the Marine Corps, she would have become a super drill instructor. Georgia has served on the Vestry, once serving as the Junior Warden, and currently as a member. She is now the chair of the Search Committee, and from what I can gather, she is doing a great job. Most importantly, however, she and Mitchell have blessed us with two truly wonderful children; we can all take pride in seeing them grow into responsible young people.

All the work done to help celebrate our sesquicentennial has made this past year a genuine joy. I am especially grateful to Karen White for her work on the Lawn Festival. Mary Lee Summerville was a mover and doer for the Ice Cream Social and brought to us the "Glory Road Gospel Singers and Band". It is my hope to have them back again this year, but have them perform in the church this time.

Having Jane Riles here as our "Artist-in-Residence" was a particularly important event for me. One of the first acts I did here in Chillicothe was to officiate at her mother's funeral. When Jane came back in 1999 to take part in an ECW event, I knew we had to have her come back to Chillicothe for a show of her own. Because of her willingness to return to Chillicothe, Ann and I developed a new friendship that may have lasting impact.

Our reception in honor Bishop and Mary Howe and Jane Riles was followed by an Evensong Service. I invited the singing group "Sweet Adelines" to be our choir. The entire group

did not perform, but those who did, under the direction of Mr. Ken Crawford, were excellent. The Evensong was as good as I had hoped, and in some respects even better.

All through the year we made Grace Church known as a place of grace and joy. I am thankful to everyone who chipped in one way or another to make all our events so pleasant and successful.

Our 150th Anniversary Celebration was not an inward look at ourselves but an opportunity to reach out to the community. We raised funds at each of our events that went to support the YMCA's Backpack Buddies Program (an effort to assure that children who are enrolled in school free breakfast lunch programs have food to eat for themselves and their families over the weekends and times when school is not in session).

Coming soon is a history of Grace Church and the Episcopal Church in Livingston County. Thanks to those who have conducted the research to make this important volume possible. Special thanks go to Sue Rose Harter and Rosina Harter, the authors of the book. Researchers include the authors along with Lois Firmin and Ann Bellais.

There's a lot more to say and think about as I conclude my ministry this year as your rector. However, all I can say or need to say is, "Thank you so much."

In the end I need to be like Jesus in his encounter with Nathaniel. When Nathaniel tries to change his initial impression of Jesus (someone coming from Nazareth) to, "You are the Son of God, the King of Israel", Jesus doesn't give in to the flattery. He simply accepts Nathaniel as a "good man" who deserves respect. Jesus doesn't need Nathaniel's declarations to know what he called to. So, regardless of how I am experienced or esteemed, I too must simply accept the fact that God has placed me here to serve.

In light of that, let me ask you these important questions: first, what attracts people, what has attracted you, to Grace Church? Second, what keeps people here? And finally, What is it we are doing that is not attractive? If there are things about us that are keeping people away, what can we do to change? What can we do to be people who are not bound by first impressions, but willing to let all who come here to mature in faith and in the love of God?

We have worked together for the good and glory of God and whatever the outcomes are, regardless, they are a blessing. All we are called to do is simply live as Christ would have us live; humble, thankful, and eager. That is all I or any of us can do as we meet the challenges of faith and service in Christ's name.

William F. Bellais, Ed.D.