

*Spontaneous comments on the readings before I began*

*Jeremiah 1:4-10 "See today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant" (vs 10)*

*1 Cor 13 "for now we see in a mirror dimly... now I know only in part..."*

*Luke 4:21-30 "They got up, drove him out of 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."*

*I wonder how these challenge authentic Christian leaders?*

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

This is now the 11<sup>th</sup> report I will have given as rector of St Bartholomew's. And close to the 40<sup>th</sup> as the rector of a parish, beginning back on the Manitoulin Island where I was appointed rector for the first time.

It never gets any easier because the intention of a rector's report is not dissimilar to that of a 'State of the union' address... Here is where we have been... here is where we are...and here is where I think we should be going.

I say "should" cautiously because the Body of Christ has only one Head, whose name is Jesus and as much as I may feel that we are to go in a certain direction as a faith community, it really is a decision that needs to be made as a community under the Lordship of Jesus.

This is one of the foundational elements of Anglican spirituality as primarily influenced by St Benedict. We repeat the words weekly in Eucharistic Prayer A,

*"Sanctify us also that we may faithfully receive this holy Sacrament, and serve you in unity, constancy, and peace, ...."*  
(BCP page 363)

Unity does not mean uniformity but rather the mutual decision to be conformed to the Head, who is Jesus. It means being in concert with one another.

Fr Travis preached this past Sunday on the Body of Christ being like a symphony orchestra. It takes more than woodwinds to make a symphony. If only one woodwind instrument is out of tune it compromises the whole of the

music. The musicians need to be playing in unity... proper preparation (each instrument needs to be in tune) and then they need to be reading the same score of music. And of course, they need to be paying attention to the same conductor.

To walk in unity as the Body of Christ, each of us needs to be in tune... in this case that means to be in tune with the Spirit of God. If any one of us is out of sync with Christ it compromises the whole body's ability to walk faithfully.

In the book of Joshua chapters 6 and 7 we read of the Israelites amazing victory of the fortified city of Jericho. Oddly enough the same victory eluded the army when they confronted the much smaller neighboring city of Ai. The deterrent to victory was that the community of Israel was no longer "in tune" (if you like) with God and that was all because one of the members started reading a different music score.

If you have forgotten the story, one Israelite, Achan son of Carmi, decided that one small bag of gold wouldn't be missed so he stole it and buried it in his tent. The Master Conductor (God the Father) had directed that all plunder from Jericho needed to be destroyed.

Because the personal discipline of one of the members was compromised the whole community suffered.

I don't want you to read too much into this, but for our purposes this morning, I believe that for us to move ahead in the way God wants, not necessarily the way that I want, or you want or the what the bishop wants, but the way God wants, we need to be a people who are striving for this same purpose in our personal lives. Only then will it have a chance of becoming a reality in our corporate life.

This is one of the reasons that I have suggested that we study Skye Jethani's book "With" during the upcoming Lenten season. For us to listen as a community we need to be certain we are listening with ears to hear as particular individuals.

Ruth Haley Barton, in her book Perusing God's Will Together, suggests the same. In order to hear God collectively, we will be providing a space where we might hear him individually.

Soren Kierkegaard was trying to capture something similar with these thoughts:

*People have the idea that the preacher is an actor on stage and they are the critics, blaming or praising him. What they don't know is that they are the actors on the stage; he (the preacher) is merely the prompter standing in the wings, reminding them of their lost lines"*

This drama of the unfolding of God's Kingdom is being acted out by all of us.

In our ecclesiastical polity we empower the rector to have the final say, but this often encourages us to acquiesce to that person, abandoning our own responsibility.

As much as I endorse our denominations way of living our life together, I want to encourage all of you to commit to a life of unity by seeking to be responsible for your life in Christ as it is part of a much larger body.

We may have been taught that we are entitled to live our lives the way we please but Jesus invites us to live our lives in

response to Him and in cooperation with others who are on the same journey.

The discipline of unity begins with the commitment to live together.

In 11 years here, one of the biggest causes of anxiety in my life is wondering who will disagree with me next and walk away thinking they know better. They may indeed know better, but the walking away is a contradiction to the biblical mandate to be striving for unity in the body.

Interestingly the second characteristic of Benedictine spirituality that helped form our families' ethos is also acknowledged in the same Eucharistic Prayer and speaks directly to this.

Constancy is the discipline of "sticking with it" in spite of the temptations to abandon a cause.

Choice is a luxury of affluence and our very affluent society has given us the privilege of picking and choosing most everything in our lives.

If we don't like the food in a restaurant we chose not to go back. If we don't like the way our hair is cut, we find another hairdresser. If we don't like our school we move to another. If we don't like the preacher we go somewhere else.

The luxury of choice undermines the discipline of constancy.

Constancy demands that we stretch and sometimes change in order to live together.

Constancy puts us in an environment of genuine growth as we learn the implications of walking with others who may not think the same as we do.

Sandpaper smooths rough edges and the community to which we are committed occasionally fulfills this role of sandpaper in our spiritual lives. Committed relationships prove to be important in our spiritual development.

The commitment to live together is because this environment is the best place to grow in our relationship with Jesus.

Paul announces that we are being changed from glory to glory but often change is missing because we want the faith on our terms rather than on God's terms.

One of the joys of working with a vestry is witnessing how conversations change over the three year period that individuals serve in this leadership community. The arbitrary distinction between the spiritual and the secular diminishes as persons come to understand that God is as concerned about the way we make decisions about maintaining our facilities as He is about the next bible study or retreat.

Some members learn that the only way to hear God is to be open. When we have our own agenda it is almost impossible to hear Him.

Some come to learn that their God has been too small. Indeed, I think this is one of the biggest lessons we have to learn. We all come with our ideas of what the church should look like, or what a person's walk with God should look like but being driven by the need to have others conform to that is a result of not believing God is big enough to show a similar truth to

others. When our God is too small to communicate with others the way we think, we take the task on ourselves.

I have found that God and I have a pretty big job dealing with my own life. Meddling in other's walk can be a distraction that ultimately prevents everyone from growing.

If we are committed to walking in unity and if there is a mutual commitment to one another as a legitimate expression of the Body of Christ, then it becomes much more comfortable to tackle some of the larger issues facing the church.

These issues, that become elephants in our midst, often have no easy answers and many are afraid to even express an opinion for fear of judgment or marginalization. This is not the way of unity.

Unity is attained when we are comfortable that there is a mutual commitment to one another no matter whether we agree or not.

This kind of unity grows in a safe place where we all know we are loved no matter where we are on our journey with Christ and consequently where we can vocalize what we believe. It is often only when we actually say something out loud and hear ourselves that we come to understand what we believe. The church should be that kind of safe place!

I would remind you that we attend church to worship and to explore what we are to believe about the great and glorious God who has revealed Himself to us in Jesus.

We don't attend because the church teaches what we already believe.

That would be like attending a grade three math class because it teaches what we believe rather than attending a senior calculus class to learn something new.

So the elephant in our midst...

Contrary to what some of you think, I do not have a definitive answer about the whole human sexuality debate currently raging in our communion. I have some thoughts but I want to live by what I have said for years.. "I know what I believe but want to be open that I might be wrong".

Sadly, more often than not, I have been proven wrong by my loving and forgiving God.

On the particular sexuality conversation, I have been pretty outspoken, indeed even militant, for a number of years but to no avail. It caused me heartache and only proved to marginalize followers of Jesus rather than unite them.

There are some things that need to be dealt with by a paid grade that is higher than mine. This is one conversation that has been debated for decades by people with a lot more biblical education than I have and they can't seem to agree.

The discipline of 'constancy' instructs me to trust those called to be leaders and live harmoniously.

I have tired judging and second guessing leadership, believing that I was better equipped to make the decisions than they.



Believe me when I say the attitude of trust has been much more liberating and ultimately more formative in my pilgrimage with Christ.

As a community of faith, I invite you to reevaluate your personal pilgrimage under the umbrella of the two disciplines of unity and constancy. Even if this causes you some anxiety because of your personal lack of control

2015 was a good year for us.

I was personally able to take only the second sabbatical in my 39 years of ministry. As much as the church canons allow this experience every 7 years, in fact that proves to be very difficult. This time was exceptional for Marjie and me.

I was able to relax because I was comfortable that the parish was in good hands!

I am grateful for the faithful and supportive ministry of all of the church staff and the hard overtime work put in by the members of vestry.

Fr Travis stepped up to the plate and knocked it out of the park, in spite of a couple of serious curve balls thrown his way.

By now you have observed that Fr Travis and Fr Smith are not a lot alike. Correct. But we are mutually compatible. One of the reasons I offered Travis this ministry was exactly because he compliments mine. Neither the parish nor I could handle a second Jerry Smith. For the body of Christ to grow we need

balance and Fr Travis helps bring that balance. Thank you my brother.

Starting at much the same time as Fr Travis, was our new director of youth formation, Steven Lefebvre. Steven has built on the foundation that was laid and is doing some creative and challenging things with the youth in our parish.

He is not Dixon Kinser. Steven was counseled to be his own man as he brings some spectacular gifts to the table. The result is that the Kingdom of God is growing and our youth are being blessed precisely because he is courageous enough to use those gifts.

I am particularly grateful for the constant and faithful work of our Children's Director, Carla Schober. Gramma Schober now!

Carla has created an amazing space for the over 220 children in our parish, to learn about Jesus Love and to learn how to live and grow together.

Carla doesn't get enough credit for the hard behind the scenes work she does. Few know that she, and a few members of her team, write most all of the Sunday school curriculum.

The work she does compliments what we are doing in the liturgy Sunday after Sunday and she rises to the occasion even when the rector makes some last minute changes.

I love having the confidence that Carla prays not only for the children but for their families regularly and I know that her prayers have been translated into very real pastoral care for many of you.

Carla's team of leaders are all to be thanked for the hard work that they give to our community.

Sunday after Sunday we are all influenced by the work that David Madeira and his music team put into liturgies. David, and organist Julia McGirt seem to be able to lift us a tad closer to heaven.

Like the number of Sunday school volunteers, it would be impossible to list all of you who volunteer to make worship as unique as it is here. David...All of the musicians on the team are willing to voluntarily gather Sunday after Sunday at 7:30am exactly because you have created an environment where they can exercise their gifts submitting to your direction because they are confident that you have both their and God's best interests at heart.

Sunday isn't about building your resume. We all know it is about helping establish an environment where genuine worship can take place. Thank you.

Our support staff, Leslie Tomlinson, Teresa Robinson are really the backbone our this place. The rest of us wander in and out as demands on our time dictate but those two are being cautious stewards of the resources of our community, seeing that the bills are paid, the heat is on and visitors are welcome. These two have more direct contact with the vestry than most other of the staff just because of their responsibilities and I am personally grateful for the trust that they have maintained and the conscientiousness with which they take their ministries.

As many of you know, the facilities committee under the able leadership of Nancy Cason, did yeoman's work this past year. The building and grounds needed the work and this committee stepped up to the plate to oversee it. But much of the day to day interact and scheduling fell on Leslie and the details of each contract received a second set of eyes by Teresa.

The scheduling alone demands a degree in logistics! Thanks to both of you, Leslie and Teresa.

I also want to remind you that we are in the gospel communications business. Jesus said "go and tell". Nobody tells the story like Sally Chambers. Sally has transitioned from a seasoned youth worker to an amazing communications director.

We have a wonderful story to tell and Sally is rising to the occasion and doing both Jesus and the family in this parish proud.

We should be equally proud of the ministry that Kelly Hull is exercising as the new director of St B's Pre school and PDO program. Kelly had really really big shoes to fill with Suzie Floyd's retirement and she too has risen to the occasion. Kelly is her own person, well equipped as a teacher and a follower of Jesus and she has the confidence it takes to lead this cadre of teachers and 100 children.

For decades our pre school and mdo program have been among the leaders in our city and we continue to hold this position under Kelly's leadership.

I have been blessed by working with many wonderful vestries since my arrival in Nashville and this year's vestry under the leadership of Natasha Deane and Seth Swihart, rank among the most congenial.

All of the members of vestry are committed to the leadership roles they have been called to and all genuinely put the Kingdom of God and the principles of God first meeting after meeting.

They have made many difficult decisions this past year and are to be commended for their prayerfulness and faithfulness.

Have they disagreed? Sure they have.

Have they wrestled with the way forward? Many a time.

Have they all gotten their way? Seldom.

This vestry have wrestled, disagreed, prayed and walked in faith that their responsibility has been to be active partners with Christ, leading this community to know the unfolding of the Kingdom of God powerfully and intimately.

The facilities committee, chaired by Nancy Cason and coupled with the remarkable able leadership of Steve Heaston, remodeled the Ministry House so that it is now the center of a lot of much of the ministry in our parish. It is comfortable, utilizable and provides exceptional space for ministry.

I must add that a gremlin seemed to get into the annual report and both Steve Heaston and Tim Villager's names were left out of the list of Facility committee members.

This is indicative of all of the work our vestry and the sub-committees of vestry has be about. From the organizing of regional gatherings, paving the parking lot, repairing the kitchen and rejuvenating tired office space, they have been intentional and given much of themselves when some may have been tempted to brush it off on staff. They have worked cooperatively with the parish personnel in a wonderful partnership.

I want to say a quick word to two specific volunteers who have given over and above the call of duty this past year.

Bob Garth stepped in to fill in temporarily as treasurer a few years ago and has stuck with the task until someone else can be found.

Bob, the word thanks seems too weak but our language doesn't seem to have any better. Your personal support and encouragement as well as the hours you have put in behind the scenes, known only to a few, have helped fine tune the way we do church here. Thanks so very very much.

And, Bonnie Bashor, who until her health demanded she step aside, has been a faithful and meticulous vestry clerk for a number of years as well. Few people could pay such close attention to vestry conversations without getting lost, or wanting to voice their own opinion but Bonnie has been able to do that all the while, as I know she is a woman of terrific prayer, praying for the counsel of the vestry leadership and for me personally.

Bonnie I thank you. The vestry thanks you and the parish thanks you.

Finally, under the rubric of thanks, I want to publically say a special word of thanks to Marjie. Marjie has seen me at my best and at my worst and been there through the good times and the bad. This my friends has exemplified for me both unity and constancy. Like many married couples, we don't agree on everything but there is little pressure conform to one another's way of thinking, but we are committed to walking and loving each other. Frankly we don't think our relationship is disposable. We work through the hard stuff because that what love does.

Marjie, thanks for exemplifying this for me!

I have already let it slip that we will be encouraging you to be reformatting your walk with Christ by reading the Jethani book With this Lenten season.

I would also like to invite the whole community to be partnering with me in making Lent a season to be learning how to tell the story about this exciting love relationship we have with Christ, to others.

Sundays though out Lent will be dedicated to coming to a greater understanding the implications of our salvation and of how to invite others to come and participate in this with us.

The Rev Dr Judy Paulsen, Director of the School of Evangelism Wycliffe College Toronto will be with us on the first Sunday of the season.

The Rt Rev Nick Dill, Bishop of Bermuda will be with us the third Sunday and the Rt Rev Dan Morse, Bishop in the Reformed Episcopal church will be with us the 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday.

All three of professional equippers and they have been tasked with helping enable us to be better partners with Jesus.

The results of this work, if we are reasonable learners, will put increased pressure on facilities that are already stretched. But I believe that it is time that we were about the business of letting others know what we are about. For a long time we have depended on our reputation. Now it is time to be intentionally active.

When I first arrived here, Bishop Bert Herlong told me that his research supported his thesis that if we were to put a sign on Granny White Pike there would be an increase in our attendance because people driving that road would finally learn what those building over there were... well, 10 years later.. we got the sign.

It took us a while but I think this sets the example. It took time and persistence to get it done. Now we learn to be persistent about living our lives in a what that enhances the story we will be learning to tell.

You see, like the sign on GWP you are the sign of God in the environments that you move. It is static. You are living. Living normally means growing... growing only happens when we are nourished and stretched. Growing happens in community. IN a community of people committed to each other (constant) and dedicated to unity where there is uniformity or not.



I believe that the church is called as never before, to abandon vitriolic rhetoric and be evidencing the Christ by our unconditional love for one another. As God has loved us unconditionally so ought we to love!

Peace to you all.

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