**“What We Do Here”**

A sermon given in celebration of St. Paul’s 60th Anniversary

By The Rev. Christopher Wendell

On the 3rd Sunday of Advent

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I want to start by saying how wonderful it was to see so many of you and others here last night, to celebrate our church’s 60th Anniversary together. The choirs, adult and youth, and all our musicians from within and beyond the parish did such a delightful job helping us share in the joy of this occasion. Our bishop Alan and Tricia his wife told me how much they enjoyed being back at St. Paul’s again after so long. And it was a treat to welcome many of our friends form beyond the parish as well.

Because we didn’t enjoy a sermon together last night, I’d like to take our sermon time this morning to reflect with you for a bit on our parish life, as together we mark this milestone of 60 years.

Some of you may remember the cult movie from the late 90’s called *Office Space* – a comedy which basically spoofed the soul-deadening life of low-level office workers for faceless corporations in the last decade of the previous century. In one scene, two management consultants, both named Bob, interview a worker about his role in the company. As they talk, the poor worker realizes that in fact he actually doesn’t do anything that can’t be done by an assistant or an answering machine. He begins to panic and becomes completely tongue-tied as he fumbles around trying to justify his continued employment. Frustrated, Bob #1 finally blurts out the question directly: “So…what would you say, ‘you do here’?” And the poor employee has no answer.

I’ve been thinking about this scene this year in the lead up to our 60th anniversary celebration, because, 11 years ago when I started seminary, if you asked me that question about parish life, I think I would have been similarly unable to answer. It’s a bit awkward to admit, you know, as a priest, but at that point in my life, I didn’t really understand parishes. Perhaps this is because I had never been an adult member of one: never brought my children to be baptized, or prayed for the soul of the nice woman who used to smile at me every Sunday from two pews up. Never brough a hotdish to a parishioner having chemotherapy or staged a filibuster at an annual parish meeting over the color of the new carpet. I just didn’t understand exactly what it was “we do here.” I was all about encouraging a life with Jesus, but he actually never talked about parishes…so I wondered if these things with their big buildings and quirky habits are really are the way to be followers of The Way?

So today, I want to share with you what you have taught me about the value of being a parish church – at least, about what it means to be this parish, in this place and this time. What it means to be St. Paul’s, and what it is, really, that we do here.

It seems to me that nearly all of what we are and what we do for each other and for the world can be summed as the fulfillment of three fundamental human desires: The desire to belong to each other, the desire to encounter the Divine, and the desire to transform the world and ourselves. Belonging, encountering and transforming. The pursuit of these desires is, in many ways, what it means to pursue a life of holiness as beloved children of God.

Belonging to Each Other.

If there was one word that I would use to describe the condition of post-modern, internet-age, smart-phone era life in America, it would be alienation. We are far more geographically mobile, bombarded with knowledge, and faced with countless distractions for our attention than any other time in history. The result of this is a pervading sense of alienation from each other: of separateness, of being fundamentally different or unaffiliated, even adrift. We feel this reality of alienation in very practical ways: living further away from our extended family, spending more and more time in our cars, and less and less time in the homes of our neighbors. And we feel it in ways that cut much deeper: greater separation between our work and domestic lives, the creeping sense that our relationships too often are based on their usefulness rather than true connection, a gnawing questioning if there really are shared values amidst the increasing awareness of this planet’s diversity.

Parish life is a blessed antidote to post-modern alienation. At least, this parish is. Here in this place, among each other, we are seen, heard, known, and cherished. Not because of our usefulness or even our goodness, but because we are the neighbors God has given to each other to share the human journey. To be sure, this doesn’t happen in an instant. There is no formula, no one-sized fits all process to go from being stranger to being known. It happens at its own pace and in its own way for each of us. And as that process unfolds, through sharing worship and fellowship together through the months and years, we begin not just to know each other, but belong to each other in a way that transcends shared interests, compatible personalities, or even likeability. Each time we walk into this place we affirm that despite all that might separate or alienated us – we belong to each other.

Encountering the Divine.

There are of course, other places in our society where one can find relationships – perhaps even something close to the sense of inherent belonging that parish life both offers and expects. But church offers us much more than just belonging. Church is the place in our lives where we most clearly encounter the Divine, where we stop, where we kneel, even if just for a moment each week at the rail, and remember that our lives are fundamentally not about us, but about God. The parish church is the place where we remember who we really are and what we are really for. I don’t know about you, but I find that I’m ever more bombarded with messages that my identity and my goals for myself and my family should be rooted in pursuit of the rewards and riches of this world. It is in these pews, it is to this altar, that I come to re-center my heart and soul around the pursuit of a life of compassion, self-giving and generosity – around a life of holiness.

And the affirmation of this alternative way of life comes from that mystical friendship that we have with Jesus. A friendship rooted in love, forgiveness, encouragement, and companionship that is nourished by our sacramental life. You know, when St. Paul’s was founded in 1955, our early years were not marked by weekly celebrations of the Eucharist. But it doesn’t surprise me, that the period of expansion and growth both in our parish and in the Episcopal Church more broadly in the mid-20th century, paralleled the more frequent celebrations of Communion as the primary way of worshipping together in parishes. There is something about the regular, weekly encounter with God that can only happen here at this table with each other, that changes everything. That reminds us who we are as friends of God, followers of Jesus, living lives that are broken, broken so they can be open to the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Transforming Ourselves and the World.

These first two desires, to belong to each other and to encounter the divine, are essential aspects of our mission as a parish. But they are not sufficient. Those two objectives alone create an orientation to the life and spirituality that is too inward, too interior, too rooted in the past to sustain us as we navigate through an ever-changing world. The third core desire that our parish satisfies is our desire to transform ourselves and the world into places of greater healing, compassion, generosity of love. Jesus didn’t come into the world simply to affirm how things were. Jesus came into the world to gather and inspire people to transform themselves and their communities. Those of us who gather now in his name, share in this deep desire.

I truly believe that all of us yearn to live in harmony with each other – and in harmony with all of creation. This is the harmony that Isaiah prophesies over and over again in the readings we heard last night: where the wolf shall lie down with the land, where every valley shall be exulted, where the rough places will be made plain, where all flesh shall see the glory of God together, where we will all find “Comfort, Comfort O my people.” And it is the reality that John the Baptist, in harsher tones, reminds us is the only way we can reach the holiness God intends for us.

Life in a parish means being part of the transformation of the world. But unlike the many other kinds of organizations and groups that seek to transform the world, we believe that the transformation of the world into a place of greater love and justice is inherently bound up with our own transformation into creatures of greater self-giving and compassion. Through our life as a parish, in ministries and missions, by the work of committees and teams, two by two or with all hand on deck, we work for the incarnation of God’s kingdom here in our communities and here in our own hearts. They cannot be separated. Progress towards one kind of transformation only occurs alongside progress towards the other.

What you have taught me, dear friends, about parish life, is that it can meet our deepest desires: to truly belong to each other (and not just go through lift adrift), to truly encounter the one-holy-living God (and not just a God of our own creation), to truly transform ourselves and each other (and not just remain trapped in cycles of our own brokenness). This is what “we do here”. It is what we have done here in decades past, and it is what we will do in ages to come. These are the things that stay the same: though pew and altar may be moved, though prayers change and old hymns get new tunes, though people come and people go – this is what endures in our common life: We belong to each other, we encounter the divine, we and our world are transformed. By the grace of God, may that be legacy we receive, enjoy, and pass on to the future. Amen.