

The 56th Annual Meeting of the Parish of St. David's Episcopal Church in Southfield, Michigan is now in session.

And this morning we open with a story -- We open with a fish story!

No, it's not about the one that got away -- it's about the one, or at least this morning, the whole church-full -- that got caught. -- That's you and me -- caught up in the nets first cast by peasant fishermen -- to be willing followers, even evangelists of Christ.

As we all know, our Gospel is Matthew's version of the 'Calling of the Disciples' -- different than John's which was last week -- and this story begins with Jesus doing one of the things that you and I often do -- He's moving.

He has called U-Haul and he is packing up his china, his Nintendo, and his power tools.

He is moving from Nazareth, his hometown -- He is moving northeast to the lake, to Capernaum -- He is moving to a little fishing village of about 1,000 people.

Why is Jesus moving?

We hear he does this as soon as John has been arrested -- So is Jesus heading north because he, too, might be in danger of Herod's wrath?

Probably not.

We remember that Jesus wasn't afraid of much of anything -- that's one of the fringe benefits of being a Diety.

No, Jesus had his own agenda -- He was intentionally going to the ancient territory of Zebulun and Naphtali -- heard both in our Gospel and Old Testament reading -- These are lands that traditionally belonged to the Gentiles -- It is here Jesus will begin his ministry.

And you and I wonder -- "Shouldn't Jesus be beginning and ending in Jerusalem?"

"He is Jewish, this is the logical place to start and end."

Let's face it, as the old joke goes:

--When the Pope calls God on the Red Phone from Rome -- it costs \$10,000 a minute.

--When the Archbishop of Canterbury calls God on the Red Phone from London -- it costs \$10,000 a minute.

--But when the Chief Rabbi calls God on the Red Phone from Jerusalem -- it's only 10-cents a minute -- Why? -- From Jerusalem, it's a local call.

So, yes, we would think that Jerusalem would be a logical starting point.

However, from the beginning Jesus chooses to make the universal nature of His mission known -- it is a mission not just to Jews -- but to the whole world.

You and I might note that the word 'Gentiles' in verse 15 is a translation of the Greek word 'Ethnos.'

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This is a part of the verse mentioned in our People’s Window -- part of the Great Commission to: “Go out and make disciples of all nations – or ‘ethnos’.”

Ethnos also takes on a meaning of “those who are not us.”

When the “us” are Jews -- ethnos refers to non-Jews, or ‘Gentiles.’ -- When the “us” are believers -- ethnos refers to pagans or non-believers. -- We, like Jesus, are to be a light to those who do not know Jesus. (Brian Stoffregan)

So Jesus heads to this small fishing village -- in fact, small fishing communities will be frequent stops for Jesus during the course of his ministry.

We all know he will often use fish and fishing in his stories and miracles -- whether it be feeding 5,000 people, walking on water, or grilling out fish on the beach in that familiar post-resurrection story -- of course that’s because Belgian Waffles had not yet been invented.

We note that Jesus did not choose to hang out with the well-to-do in the bigger towns around him -- He shunned the celebrities, luminaries, and politicians of Birmingham and the million dollar lofts of Royal Oak -- apologies, of course, to Mayor Ellison -- instead, Jesus made his way among the poor and subsistent farmers and fisher folk -- in Caseville, Saline and Richmond

If you don’t know where any of these small towns are -- you may be like me and have to look on a map -- And as we locate these towns we can’t help but wonder:

“Why... there?”-- “Why such places of seemingly small significance?”

And then we recall God’s consistent preference for the underdog.

David was the forgotten shepherd boy -- Moses was an abandoned orphan floating down the Nile in a reed basket -- And now Jesus and his mission:

It was to the good folk in tiny towns in a backwater region of the Roman Empire that Jesus first revealed himself.

Yes, the world calls them small and insignificant -- But God calls them something else -- By word and deed, Jesus calls them worthy and of great value.

So when you and I feel our lives are of little significance -- When we have serious doubts about our own self-worth

We can never forget the depth of Jesus’ statement here -- Jesus came for our small and insignificant lives -- No care, no life, is too insignificant.

We are valuable and precious in God’s sight -- And those who feel like God would never be interested in them -- are actually the ones whom Jesus is sitting right next to.

And we are the ones Jesus is calling to be Disciples.

Disciples. -- Another word might be ‘apprentice’ -- And if we can visualize this concept without thinking too much about Donald Trump’s hair, even better.

The writer Dallas Willard says Disciples are God’s apprentices.

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We are not perfect.

We are not masters.

We are learning the trade.

You and I spend our entire lives learning the Christian craft.

As apprentices, we are a people who have simply decided to be with another person -- Jesus. -- And we do this in order to become capable of doing what that other person does -- or to become what that other person is.

So you and I are learning from Jesus to live our lives as Jesus would live them if He were here. -- We are not necessarily learning to do everything He did. -- But we are learning how to do everything we do in the manner in which Jesus did all that He did.

This doesn't just go for our personal lives -- but it also goes for our life together -- corporately, for St. David's.

We are all on this road of discipleship -- And as part of our Annual Meeting Address let's take a look at where that road is taking us in 2008 -- Let's look at which direction our parish is headed in the year ahead:

The most significant change you and I will see up here in the sanctuary in 2008 -- will be the absence of this man -- As we all know, our deacon Al Corner has tried to retire twice before -- but has flunked. -- His heart is for this parish -- and each time the need arose, Al rose to the occasion. -- As we all know, St. David's has arguably not had a more faithful cleric than this man.

Al will not be retiring from St. David's -- just as his role as deacon. -- He has agreed to stay on as our Deacon Emeritus -- where he will continue to handle pastoral care issues -- so Ida May, you won't have to sit alone any longer -- no more gossiping about Al -- His last Sunday serving at the altar will be in three weeks, February 17 -- and we will have a Deacon Al Sunday on June 22 -- to correspond with his ordination date.

So would you please stand with me and in that old American tradition -- put your hands together to honor the ministry of Al Corner -- and to give him the much needed support he will need to stay retired! (Applause)

Now, back to our goals for the year ahead-

As mentioned in your January newsletter -- Goal #1 for 2008 -- the large, overriding goal -- is to do something Al's ministry has been all about -- and that is to live more deeply into community. -- 2008 is our year of community.

After 4 months, your new rector is still learning people's names-

I appreciate your patience with me -- I think many of you know the growing pains of a new rector -- in your case, you know it well, you've had a lot of practice -- and you have been most gracious.

In the year ahead, I look forward to getting to know you even better -- that we may share our joys, fears, ailments and life stories.

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I look forward to see how our community grows together-- and grows in relationship, care and love.

Which leads us to Goal #2:

This is to nurture our loving community – To grow in love for one another and for the world

This means continuing to foster and cultivate our time before, during, and after services as real connecting points. -- To continue to use coffee hour to help us lay and strengthen the bonds of affection we all have for one another.

The Friday Feasts, all of the small groups that are here -- an ordinary sense of care and responsibility for one another should and does pervade our parish.

We all know the role of love in our own families. -- What keeps a family together through many crises and disagreements is that members understand they are loved -- and they, in turn, love the others in the family.

That is the bottom line here as well.

Whatever else Episcopalians know, we should absolutely know that we are loved by the church -- that each one of us is loved by this church.

We feel it in Al Corner’s hugs, -- We see it in the eyes of every one of our greeters, -- We hear it in the giggling of our little ones.

Jesus himself cites love as a top priority for church community: “This is how all will know you are my disciples: your love for one another.” (Jn 13:35)

Goal #3 is to help us get more in touch with this love.

It is to become more of a Transforming community -- to establish and nurture touchstones of spiritual transformation.

One tragic assumption that the mainline churches have made over the years -- is to assume that everyone who comes here knows what a being a Christian is all about.

We’re put through six weeks of classes when we’re a teenager and we assume we know all about how to pray. -- We assume we know everything in the Bible. -- We assume that we have been baptized, or confirmed or received into the Church -- therefore we have no other need for spiritual transformation.

The harsh reality is that some of us who come to church have never had an authentic experience with Jesus.

I know, because I went to church for years and felt unchallenged.

Why do you think people leave here and either don’t go to church anymore -- or join one of these non-denominational, big-box churches who offer real transformative experiences.

Too many of our churches keep Jesus at a safe distance -- Sure, we know the Creeds, the prayers and the Bible stories -- but where is there room for transformation?

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The Christian walk isn't about a one-time experience -- Jesus calls us daily to live and die for Him

Transformation -- That's Goal #3 for this year.

We'll see it played out in more services like our Friday night Taize service -- which we held 10 days ago -- if you would like an idea off the potential for spiritual transformation that these evening prayer services hold just ask Rose Kolberg -- or most anyone else who was there.

We'll also be doing more work together with the Daughters of the King. -- This is our group of devoted women who are committed to prayer in our midst.

Over the year we will be talking about how our Sunday morning prayer time in the chapel during communion -- can be an even more profound touchstone for transformation.

For generations St. David's has helped searching people find their way to Jesus.

Our challenge is to make Jesus and the Gospel message more accessible and recognizable.

If we are looking for a genuine relationship with Jesus,

If we're looking for a place that will help us grow in loving service in Christ, -- our community must strive to provide authentic and accessible answers to these basic questions right here.

Finally, Goal #4 is to grow in service.

In the year ahead we will see the outreach activities that we do together refined, rejuvenated, rekindled, and re-invented.

We will work to give each other opportunities to get involved in life-changing work.

Many of us have the energy and desire to share what we have with those around us -- we do, and we're going to.

We're going to see more opportunities to shine our light.

Not simply things like the Haiti mission trip. -- and Soup Kitchen Sunday -- in which we will all be invited to hop in our cars after church and go downtown to be with our homeless brothers and sisters -- helping with a meal and a clothing drive.

But we'll also see new opportunities emerge -- If we want to help lead worship or a Bible Study among impoverished, recovering single-moms, we'll get a chance.

If we want to pitch in on a Habitat project, -- giving up a Saturday to help someone who needs a home, we'll get a chance.

If we want to mingle and minister to homeless men in our area, we'll get a chance.

As we all know, the church is unique among other human organizations -- it was created for the express purpose of helping those who are not its members.

Growing in service is our fourth goal for 2008.

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If you check the back of your bulletin you can see these goals written out for us -- 2008 will see us growing in community, in love, in transformation and in service.

Please take these goals home -- Please pray about them regularly -- Notice the space next to them -- you might even want to write down your thoughts next to them -- and suggest ways we might grown into each one of these.

Discipleship is not just a personal goal, it is a communal goal as well.

It is communal in a very profound sense -- back to our fish story.

In this morning's Gospel, you and I see Peter and Andrew and James and John fishing - - and they're not using bait. -- They're using nets. -- The fish they're after don't have the choice to "bite or not to bite."

All of a sudden the net comes -- All of a sudden they are swooped up and lumped together with all sorts of other fish -- They have no choice in the matter.

And there they are -- dragged into a new life.

And this is just like you and me. -- We too are swept up by that wily Holy Spirit -- dragged out of our comfortable environments -- And brought into a new environment in which survival is hardly guaranteed.

Caught fish suspect they are going to die. -- You and I suspect that the Christian life -- the radical life of following Jesus -- calls us, too, to die. -- It does.

For we too are fish out of water -- This world is not our home -- but the life of the disciple calls us to make it the very best we can.

It calls us to restore, redeem, and re-build -- for we are fish with promises.

Just like the early disciples, we follow because we hear good news -- Good news of God's punch-drunk love for me and you -- Smack dab in the middle of God's refrigerator is a photograph of "little old us" -- We are the picture on God's screen-saver -- And this amazing love has called us together as St. David's.

Called and Christened to do Christ's work -- and it is good, -- it is fulfilling -- and it is fun.

For, like these early disciples, we have an adventure ahead of us! -- 2008 is going to be a great year. -- Community, love, transformation and service

Let this annual meeting be in recess until the resuming of business following our potluck.

Amen.

Lessons:

Isaiah 9:1-4,
Psalm 27: 1. 5-13,
1 Cor. 1:10-18,
Matthew 4:12-23