

**RECTOR'S ANNUAL ADDRESS**  
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“To them he gave power to become children” John 1

I have always been drawn to this verse from the Prolog of the Gospel according to John. “To them he gave power to become children.” It is a remarkable reference. Following on the heels of some of the most sonorous phrase of Scripture, affirming that Jesus was indeed the eternal Word of God, that Jesus was God and that Jesus was from the beginning with God...that all things we made by him...that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us...and gave power for us to become children.”

Well, this isn't a sermon, but rather the annual Address of the Rector to this congregation. But it is well that we begin by reminding ourselves that everything we are about, every success and every shortcoming, is all about our relationship with the one who moves among us. And our Lord Jesus Christ moves as well among millions of other congregations, upon all who call on his name. To us all, he gives the power to become children.

I regularly test that verse. As most of you know, I am an avid bicycle rider. A road bicycle rider- long distances and skinny tires. When I am on my bike, I feel like a kid again. I remember the feeling of independence and exhilaration. The joy of motion and discovery. And if I connect the experience to the Bible, I remember that Jesus once admonished his disciples who attempted to shield him from little children, saying to them, “Unless you enter the Kingdom like a little child, you cannot enter.”

So, I hope that in this spirit, you will hang in with me as I use riding a bike as a metaphor for our life together at St. John's.

1. The Cumberland Valley is a paradise for bicycling. We are blessed with beautiful country roads which you can get to from town in just in a couple of minutes. You see more on a bike. Details of architecture and nature which you would never notice if driving a car are discernable. In fact, all your senses are alive. You feel the coolness of the stream as you cross a bridge on a hot summer's day. Your hearing is attune to all sound, but especially to dogs and cars which might be approaching from the back. You can smell the fields and flowers- and that can be a pleasant or an unpleasant experience. We have lots of flat roads, but just as many rolling hills. And if you want a challenge there are some really tough climbs to test the legs and heart.

I really think of St. John's as a kind of paradise. Now I don't want to be too over the top nor do I mean to be competitive or to push comparisons, but I love this church. This is my 25<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting as your rector. Dottie and I have made Carlisle our home and raised a family here. You are our friends and family. And truth be told, Fr. Mark is the unofficial pastor to a fairly large, extended bicycle team of several hundred folks I have

come to know in this community, who look to me to be their spiritual companion and guide.

There are many wonderful places to ride a bike, but we give thanks for this one, this church. My exuberance doesn't mean that I am uncritical of myself or of our congregation. But I begin this Annual Address by declaring that St. John's Church is healthy. In this past year we have grown, slightly, for the first time in four years. I could quote lots of facts and figures and will in fact make some references in this Address to important mile markers, but let me simply share a brief story to illustrate my joy in this congregation.

Just last week, I visited one of our dear parishioners in the hospital following serious surgery. It was one of several visits I made. Mo. Robyn made several as well. And I heard that many of you were on hand, or checking in. Before I prayed with him and his wife, he stopped me. He wanted to tell me how important St. John's had become in their lives and how they were overwhelmed with support and care. In his words, "In eleven years in this community, we never felt part of things until we came to St. John's". The man was also worried about snow which was predicted to arrive. Who would clear the sidewalks at his home since he was in the hospital? I assured him it would be taken care of. When we only got an inch or so last Friday, I decided that since I couldn't ride by bike on my day off, I would go over and do the sidewalks myself for exercise. But when I got to the house, I saw that someone, probably from St. John's, had already done the job!

I wish everyone would feel that way. I wish we could meet everyone's needs. Some don't have the best experience here and I wonder if we have been neglectful or failed to live out our calling when people leave St. John's. But I also remember that one size doesn't fit all. That said, we have a unique combination of heritage, liturgy, buildings, central location, size, music, social ministry, and people. We have a wonderful church and I am so very thankful to have had the opportunity to serve the majority of my years in ordained ministry here. It's a great place to ride your bike.

2. Lance Armstrong's book was entitled, "It's not about the Bike". OK. I get it. It is about the rider. But.....us bike guys are forever tinkering with our bikes and equipment. We like to upgrade. We are looking for some advantage as we huff and puff up the long hills. And we sure want to be safe.

Our historic church buildings and churchyard was the subject of some significant upgrades in 2010. After a couple of relatively quiet years, we accomplished the following: the new and handsome metal fence along the perimeter of the Churchyard; the new church signs and lighting; the renovations to the chancel, including the completion of the tile floor under the choir and marble steps at the altar, the restoration of the high altar and baptismal font marble, and the refinishing of the choir stalls and clergy chairs; the restoration of the two 80 year old stained-glass windows on the south nave wall; and the installation of the new handicapped accessible door to the Cloister. And in the next couple of weeks, we anticipate the long awaited upgrade in the kitchen, including an

industrial dish washer. All of these projects have been paid for by private, individual giving and the fence, by a grant from the United Thank Offering. The parish has not paid one penny of the costs.

3. When I go on a bike ride, I always plan the route before setting out. I guess some people just ride out and pick their way as the spirit leads them. But I like to think it through a bit: we need to decide how long a ride it will be and how many hills we are willing to tackle. Depending on the time of day, we plan our route to avoid schools letting out or predicted thunderstorms or the direction of the wind. Sometimes it goes according to plan. But there are always surprises. A tail wind can become a head wind.

Four years ago this congregation entered into a significant and extended process of discernment. We asked for your hopes and dreams and learned about Mo. Robyn's sticky notes. In the end we established a five year Strategic Plan in which we said we would focus on four primary areas and a couple of secondary but critically important objectives.

First, we decided to establish a Preschool program to be housed in the Lloyd Center on weekdays and to be part of the Ministry of the congregation. This is our St. John's Preschool. It is without apology a Christian school and features an outstanding staff, supported by an exceptional board of directors. Now in its third season, it has already expanded to include 22 children with morning and afternoon programs, three days a week. In the fall, they plan to expand once again with a two morning a week program for young 3 year olds. It is so good to have the sounds of children daily around the church.

Second, we anticipated a transition in leadership of our music program. That transition occurred early in 2010 as we welcomed Brian Rotz. As you all know, we have been blessed by his artistry and leadership. Our liturgy has been enhanced by his music at the organ and piano, by the development of both our fine choirs, and by his participation in Saturday 5:00 music.

Third, like every congregation, we fretted about our children and youth and were determined to provide a solid, safe place for them to grow in the faith and as a community. We thought we might be able to find and call a young "youth minister". Even though we tried, that vision hasn't come to pass as of now. But, we do have a great team of adult leaders and the largest group of teens we have had in almost ten years. The highlight of their year was another successful Mission Work Week, this one in nearby Perry County. And they are anticipating a very special trip "of a lifetime" this summer as we go off to Ireland. All of this is supported by years of apple butter selling, an annual effort which now clears about \$12,000 each year.

Fourth, we wanted to do more outreach or social ministry. We dreamed of doubling our budget in support of worthy and important ministry in this community and indeed, in the developing world. This is another goal yet to be achieved. The prolonged recession has delayed this. But that doesn't mean that we have sat on our hands. Our record of outreach and advocacy is extemporaneous. Our flagship ministry, the Summer Program for

Youth celebrated its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary last summer, expanding to include 40 at risk children. Our support of the Bishop Masereka Foundation and its ministry in Uganda has increased year by year. We continue to support and carry out vital ministry in scores of venues and initiatives.

When combined with our work this past year to upgrade our facilities, it is clear that as we enter the final year of our Strategic Plan, we have now either completed or made substantial progress in meeting our goals.

4. Since riding a bike is especially good exercise and can lead to better health, it is important to challenge yourself. That means longer rides and mountains. And we have some tough climbing not far from here- Wagners Gap and Whiskey Springs, and even spinning up King Gap. I don't enjoy the climbing. But I try to do some. You have to push yourself.

And we always have challenges ahead of us at St. John's. The Kingdom has not come! In the coming weeks, four "task force" groups will get to work. They are sizing up the hills and mountains which loom ahead of us. They will report back to the Vestry with plans and models.

One group will consider our needs for Assisting Clergy ministry. This will include a review of the past models, full time Associate clergy and half time, as we now have since Mo. Robyn joined the bishop's staff in September. We want to take a step back and talk about how it is going and we want to anticipate what our options might be when the next change comes.

A second group will review our fund raising activities. We now have at least five groups within the parish doing fundraising projects. And two years ago we began to program a series of fund raising events to support the general expenses of the congregation. As you know, this work has been spectacularly successful, not just as a means of bringing in critical financial resources in a time of recession, but also in bringing us together. Still, the task force needs to look at the whole picture and help us coordinate efforts as we decide where to go from here.

The third group meeting soon will be the Stewardship Committee. For the first time in about 8 years, they will do an evaluation of our stewardship effort and make suggestions to the Vestry for alterations to our pattern of visitations and pledging. And a fourth group, yet to be formed, will be asked to tackle the new social networking vehicle of Facebook, and other emerging communications issues.

These hills will not be easy. Maybe we aren't "trained up" enough to make the climb. But we need to be challenged and accept the challenge. These task forces will be the first attempt to transition into a new Strategic Plan, a process we will want to carefully chart by this time next year.

5. Although I sometimes don't have a riding buddy, I much prefer to enjoy a bike ride with a friend, rather than riding solo. Of course, it's safer to ride with a friend in case something happens. And besides, it is good to have some conversation along the way.

As I have often remarked from the pulpit, the Christian life is all about relationship. I don't think it is possible to practice the Christian faith in isolation. Community can be wonderful and community can be horrible. As one who is in the middle of all the "stuff", for better and for worse, I am more keenly aware of the ways in which we fail to live up to our calling to be sisters and brothers. But very truthfully, I need to tell you that I am not hearing lots of grumbling. Yes, we all have our moments and get a bit brittle and cranky. Sin is sin and we are in the middle of it. That said, in the words of the old African American spiritual we sang a couple of weeks ago, "there is a sweet, sweet spirit in this place".

This church is not primarily about a historic, beautiful building, nor even about having wonderful music, or children's programs, or outreach ministry. It is about the Circles of Relationship which bind us together. It is about enjoying the ride with each other and being there when we get in trouble. Along the road we learn about each other's "quirks" yet somehow, we work through it all.

This past year we have welcomed some 58 new members, while we lost 56! Well, that's two more than we started out with last January. We lost a couple of dear ones who entered into eternal life, but we had the fewest number of funerals than in about 15 years. And according to the bishop, we presented to him last May the largest Confirmation Class he has had in four years of his episcopate.

I could go on and on about the good work of the Pastoral Ministries Commission, providing a network of care and response for these experiencing troubles on their bike ride. Or about the way we say Good bye to dear ones moving away. Or about the seniors and home bound who come once a month for the Loaves and Fishes Luncheon or the forty some strong who are now a part of the Safe group evening dinners and programs, supporting LGBT people and helping us as our society and church continues to engage in related and important issues.

And with the memory still fresh in my mind, I could remind you of the amazing Twelfth Night Weekend just three weeks ago. Or our hosting of the Martin Luther King service two weeks ago. This church was filled to overflowing with people who are mostly not members, four times in eight days.

But like all good bike rides, time dictates that this reflection needs to come to an end and we need to head in so we can get out another day on the bike.

So, let me close this report and leave you with a vision. My vision, but actually, our official St. John's vision. It's a fine statement, authored by Dan Hayward a couple of

years ago as we sought to articulate what this congregation seeks to be about. Here it is- what we called in 2008 a Vision for the Future:

*Arriving at St. John's on Sunday morning is like walking into a celebration of 12<sup>th</sup> Night. Persons of many cultures, ages and interests are united in the worship of the incarnated Christ. The church is packed with people gathered in fellowship, joined in prayer, singing with joy. The Lloyd Center overflows with children eagerly seeking knowledge of their Christian heritage. The undercroft bursts at its seams with young people planning their next mission project. The table is crowded yet everyone is welcome . . . and they made room for me.*

“To them, he gave power to become Children of God.” Amen.