

Homily – October 15, 2023

Gracious God, we thank you for creating and recreating us to do your good works in the world. Pour into our hearts the spirit of your abundance. Remind us that what we have is only and always for your glory, and that what we give for the work of your church is our testimony to the blessings we have already received. Guide us as we make the choices that will help build your kingdom now and in the future. And sustain us always with the promise of the gift beyond price, your presence among us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Please be seated. And thank you, Father Howie, for the beautiful prayer.

Good morning, faith family. For those who do not know me, I am Helen Spence and I am so glad to be home. I was born into this parish, was confirmed here, and nearly 47 years ago was married in this very room. My roots and love for this community of faith are deep. The foundation of my faith was laid in this place, and I am grateful for that. When I left St. Thomas's in 1977, I stepped out of the cocoon of "home" and embarked on a journey of discovery about myself and my faith. This morning I want to share some of what I have learned about community over the years, particularly as it pertains to Annual Giving.

The Isaiah reading this morning reminds us that we who glorify God by our prayers and good works must be a strong and patient people, waiting for and rejoicing in the Lord's abundant mercy. The 23rd Psalm, which I am pretty sure most of us can recite from memory, is the comfort of God's love in words – a big giant verbal hug – the knowledge that God is with us always and walks with us daily. The Apostle Paul, whatever we else say about him, knows the value of community. He constantly thanks people, sending messages to those who have been doing the work he started. In today's reading, written from prison, Paul urges the Phillipians – and us – to rejoice in the Lord, reminding us that the Lord is near to us in all we do and all we are. All of these lessons, in this season of Annual Giving, remind us that we have been called to share the love of God with our community – the one here at St. Thomas's and the one in which St. Thomas's is located. We have a job to do, one

to which we are called over ages of ages, and, more importantly, we do not this work alone.

Have you noticed over these last few weeks that Jesus' parables are becoming more and more dire? Today's parable from Jesus is the most severe to date. My first thought upon reading it was, "REALLY? Thrown into outer darkness? Weeping and gnashing of teeth? Where is God's love in THAT?" Realizing that this story is aimed at the self-righteous and not those striving for God's righteousness doesn't make it any easier to hear.

My next thought – once I got past wondering how I was going to make this work for the point I am trying to make this morning – was, "The king in this story has an overpowering ego and a great deal of money and power, but he has no sense or understanding of community." He seems to care far more for the show than the people involved – especially the one who is not dressed properly.

Community, to me, is a place where we feel welcomed, safe and loved by God – No Exceptions. I have, sadly, worshipped in a community in Oklahoma not unlike the one in today's parable; one where appearance was more important than the substance of the message and the teaching. I went there because I did not yet understand that community is not there to serve each individual's needs, but to serve the needs of the community within and around it. That church took money and made it more important than mission.

Later, when we had moved to Virginia and were searching for a parish, we tried an historic church – and quickly discovered that we heard more about George Washington and Robert E. Lee than Jesus Christ. (I am pleased to report that is no longer the case in that particular parish.) Next, we tried a parish where we were spoken to at coffee hour once by the Rector, and not at all by anyone else. The parish we eventually chose was one that welcomed us at the door, made certain we had someone to sit with, introduced us to the choir director during coffee hour, and assisted us with registering our children in their pre-school. We stayed there for 35 years. That community was where our family grew and was nurtured in the love

of God. And it was a community that very much reminded me of St. Thomas's. We felt at home.

It was also the community that gave me a chance to see the church beyond the doors of the one I attended and nurtured my call to serve in a wider capacity; as a regional president, Diocesan Council representative, Standing Committee member, Diocesan Stewardship Chair, Diocesan Convention delegate, and eventually, deputy to General Convention from what was then the largest Diocese in the Episcopal Church. I still engage in much of that work here in the Episcopal Church in Delaware and find it rewarding and constantly renewing. As a personal aside, I have to say that there is NOTHING like worshipping with over 5,000 Episcopalians from around the world, raising voices in prayer and song. We are an international church where there are friends to be met, and friends to be made.

Community works differently in every place, with each group of people involved, because it is the people who create the community. People who pray together, work together, socialize together, live in the Love of the Lord together – this is the bond. And the good work of God in Christ, for which we were all created is done more effectively when the work is shared. It is done yet more effectively when we reach beyond the doors of this building and seek to love our neighbors as we love ourselves – seek to work with our neighbors as well as we work together. I am so glad that we partner with St. Nicholas in our work at Hope Dining Room; glad that we provide goods and services to both the Newark Empowerment Center, housed at Newark Methodist Church, and the Delaware Food Bank. The Narrative Budget provided to you all with your pledge cards gives everyone a new, and in some cases more understandable, way to see how our money is used to do God's work with and for each other and those around us. The outreach programs I mentioned here are but a few of those in which this parish is involved – and we all have a role to play in making our mission and ministry what others think of when they hear of St. Thomas's Episcopal Parish in Newark Delaware. I am not the only parishioner who serves beyond the doors of this parish, not just in active outreach, but on the various Diocesan boards. We are all created for Good Works – all called to find our place in those good

works. We all have differing gifts, and different calls for using those gifts. Our physical capabilities change as we change. Our needs change as we change. Our community changes as we change. The community outside these doors requires different things now than it did when I was a child here and we must meet those new challenges with the same call and spirit as those who went before us in this place.

Our Vestry seeks to serve this parish and the community in which it is located. New initiatives, such as a plan for a refurbished coffee hour which will provide both hospitality and social justice opportunities, are under discussion and you should look for communication from our parish leaders as to what is being planned. The budget provides the financial resources to do the good work to which we are all called. Filling out pledge cards is the **ONLY WAY** the Vestry can truly know what your intentions are for the coming year – which allows them to better do their work. Our goal, which includes an increase of just over 10% over the 2023 budget, is \$290,000.00. This is more than doable, if each of us does their part. Every pledge, whatever the size, matters. However you choose to pay your pledge, please fill out a pledge card, so that there is a record of your gift. We have some of the most amazingly dedicated professionals working here and they have more than earned our support, in my opinion. If there needs to be change that involves added expenditures we are not aware of at this time, we need to be financially prepared and fiscally responsible to this community that nurtures us, as well as depends on us. October 29 – two weeks from today – we will celebrate the ingathering of our pledges. If you cannot make a pledge by that date, know that it is never too late to do so. If your circumstances change, up or down, it is never too late to change your pledge. But please, prayerfully consider how much your gift means to all of us as we move into our 2024 budget year. As the opening prayer states, what we give for the work of God's church is our testimony to the blessings we have already received. Amen.