

Epiphany 3 Year C: 26 / 27 January 2019

St. James' Episcopal Church, Clinton NY

The Reverend Gary Cyr

“When we remain focused, however, on giving glory to God in all we do and say, problems minimize themselves as it becomes less about us individually and more about our collective witness to Christ’s love.”

Nehemiah 8: 1-3, 5-6, 8-10

Psalm 19

1 Corinthians 12: 12-31a

Luke 4: 14-21

The City of Corinth. A city at the cross roads of culture and finance. A cosmopolitan city of diversity and inclusion. Its geographical location allowed it to attract peoples from far afield with its promise of welcome and opportunities for employment. Such a city was an attraction for many from varying backgrounds throughout the region. The benefits of such a diverse population, however, were weighed against the short-comings that inter-culturalization brings. Into this matrix of civilization, Paul establishes a church community.

Planting a church is one thing. Nurturing that church in an ongoing fashion is another matter altogether. Paul will find over time that the Church at Corinth will prove to be problematic. The very diversity that the early Christian community in Corinth had was both blessing and challenge. This community comprises of individuals from varied economic backgrounds and religious persuasions. Factors that can cause internal conflict in any social gathering, much less a religious one. Paul’s work was to constantly remind the community that its focus was not on privileging this group or that group according to their particular “gifts”, but to recognize that the variety of gifts stem from the same God, as incarnate in Christ Jesus. That these gifts were not for one’s own edification, but were meant to give glory to God – the very heart of biblical stewardship.

C. S. Lewis, in his book *Mere Christianity*, gives voice to this idea of Biblical stewardship when he writes: *Every faculty you have, your power of thinking or of moving your limbs from moment*

to moment, is given you by God. If you devoted every moment of your whole life exclusively to [God's] service, you could not give [God] anything that was not in a sense [God's] own already. Lewis captures well the essence of what Paul is saying to the church at Corinth. There are a variety of gifts, but one Lord of all, to whom is given the greater glory. In other words, it's not about me, it's not about you, it's about us, in our diversity, working together for God's greater glory. Paul is speaking of unity in the midst of diversity. The focus is on living the truth as revealed in Christ Jesus. That is the purpose of the church community and a vital message to each of us as we begin a new year in the life of our parish.

Though the premise is to give glory to God, each parish has its own vision and mission within the household of God – the *koininia*. The community at Corinth had it; and the parish of St. James has it. There are as many gifts as there are people within a parish, and when we work together for the common good of the wider community in which we are nestled, we give glory to God through our evangelism. Our mission is to participate with God in reconciling all things in Christ, and we do this through our prayer life as well as our work life.

The cornerstone of our prayer life is our worship. That moment when we gather together to hear God's word spoken and break bread together in the Eucharist. Over the past year, our worship life has been enriched with good music, enlivened with a variety of preaching voices, and an opportunity to experience new prayers. Besides seeing such joy at Christmas and Easter services, the parish, according to our parochial report, has experienced a 9% growth in Sunday attendance and a 5% growth in parish membership. Our pledge campaign has proven to be a blessing as the number of pledges remains steady and with a financial increase over the previous year. A deep sense of hope and optimism prevails within our parish and for that I am deeply grateful and give thanks to God for the generosity of time, talent, and finances that each of you contribute. But a parish is more than numbers. It is also about vision and moving forward in faith that the Holy Spirit is at work amongst us and with us.

Our primary task is to raise our profile within our community such that when I'm at Utica coffee and the barista asks where I work, to which I reply St. James, their response isn't "Where's that?" I look forward to continuing my work with the Clinton Ministerium – an ecumenical group of mainline pastors – to address community needs. Last year we held the

second Blessing of the Animals on the village green with proceeds benefiting pet needs at Country Pantry. Our parish also participated in Rise Against Hunger, something I pray we will continue with this year. The Ministerium also held, for the first time, a Longest Night service, the premise of which was brought to my attention by a parishioner who is a Stephan Minister. In conversation with attendees afterwards, it was apparent that though some came simply to support the service and others out of curiosity, it was well received and strongly encouraged that we continue the practice. Speaking of Stephan Ministries, though monies have not been allotted in the budget to pay the one-time enrollment fee for the parish, Stephan Ministry is something I continue to support and desire to enroll our parish in. There has been talk that the parish doesn't know about this ministry which is curious as parishioners have mentioned that it was looked at during Rev. Messenger's tenure as Rector. We currently have three trained Stephan Ministers in our congregation and I look forward to engaging with them more fully in the coming year as we learn about this ministry and the benefits it provides to the community.

I am also committed to being more involved with the Interfaith Coalition of Greater Utica. Connecting with faith leaders from other traditions helps to build bridges in a culture rife with misinformation and prejudices. Thus far, my time with the group has generated a recent field trip to a local synagogue by our parish bible study, which all in attendance were excited and desire to return for further conversation. I am hopeful that other opportunities for engagement with different traditions will prevail in the coming year.

Speaking of Bible Study, this past year saw the parish being a group where one has not been for some time. Though we are small in number, it has grown to include a diverse group of folks and backgrounds. Our mid-rash approach has generated good conversation and we have grown in faith and spiritual awareness. A theological study group was also added late last year. We are only a few but we have read material that challenges and nudges us along our life a faith. Along with these two offerings, there are two lay-lead book groups that continue onward and foster companionship as they explore a variety of reading materials. It is my hope that the parish in general will look at and read about the desert mothers and fathers, the ascetics of our Christian tradition. I encourage you to read about the saints and from the prophetic voices of our times: Henri Nouwen, Thomas Merton, Joan Chittister, Ester de Waal to name a

few. There is much in this area of spirituality that can enrich our lives, so I invite the parish in general to continue to explore our Christian tradition's rich resources.

I look forward to continuing our relationship with the Diocese's project in the Learning Initiative and our own Guiding Team as we explore together ways to deepen our prayer life and give witness to Christ's love in the world. We need to take risks and try new means of being present in the world. In other words – raise our profile. Already, I have spoken with Hospitality to have a pancake supper on Mardi Gras / Fat Tuesday where the proceeds benefit a local charity besides the ones we already support. You will be hearing more about that very shortly. I am hopeful that the Guiding Team will participate in this and other projects this year that will make our presence in Clinton better known and the monies we raise supporting small local charities that often go unnoticed. I want to work with Outreach to develop scholarships for deserving Seniors in high school as well as scholarships for those in need with St. James' day school. I am hopeful for more parish buy-in with these and other fund raising projects in the months to come.

We also continue with our support of our companion parish in Haiti, and I am hopeful that I will get to meet Fr. Fred in the near future. There is much that I am deeply grateful for here at St. James, and I am filled with gratitude for all we have done together and excited about the projects we can do together as we give witness to Christ's love.

St. Paul found the church at Corinth to be problematic at times. That is simply normal for any gathering of individuals coming together from varied backgrounds. When we remain focused, however, on giving glory to God in all we do and say, problems minimize themselves as it becomes less about us individually and more about our collective witness to Christ's love. We may not be as cosmopolitan as Corinth, but I do believe we are a diverse and inclusive parish, and as such, we have our challenges. But we also have faith. Thus, I am humbled by the good work this parish has done and look forward to the good works we will do together in the coming year.