

The Persistence of Joy

The Rector's Report at the Annual Meeting of St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Henderson, January 25, 2015

Introduction

Last April, I began a series in the Good News commenting on St. Paul's list of the Fruit of the Spirit. "The fruit of the Spirit," I quoted our Parish Patron, "is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." I had a wonderful plan to take each of these in turn, spending some deliberate time reflecting each month, and then sharing my thoughts with you over the following nine months. That way, I figured, by the time today came, I would be ready to organize my annual report along the lines of Paul's list, like I did last year with the Baptismal Covenant.

It didn't work out quite like that. Last spring, I experienced a couple of personal losses, among them the passing of my step-father in May, that pretty much threw my head and heart for a loop, and made mincemeat out of my best laid plans for reflection on Paul's fruit basket. I managed to get the May reflection on love done, but when it came time to move on to peace and joy, I just wasn't ready for it. I made a more literary excuse for skipping a couple of paces on the list, but the real reason was that my heart just wasn't in it.

All that to say that this has been a tough year for me. I'm not sure how I would have made it through without the help of several people. The first, of course, is Jenny. If I said that Jenny was my soul-mate, she would roll her eyes and maybe even mutter, "Yeah, right!" because, whether or not we *should*, that is just not how we talk to each other. But over time some of you have heard me talk about Jenny as the one person in the world with whom I am most intimate, the one who knows me better than anyone else, the one who sometimes knows me better than *I* know me. She is sometimes my sail when I can't seem to find the wind to keep moving. She is sometimes my anchor when I might otherwise sail blindly off some precipice. She is always, *always* my fiercest defender, even when I don't deserve it. And I don't tell her any of that nearly often enough.

Even when things were most difficult this year, or most hurtful, or most confusing, there was *also* always a handful of friends that were ready to hear about it. You know who you are – thank you. Usually my chief sounding board, however, was the one I call "my part-time Judy," who heard way more of my inner turmoil this year than is in her job description. Judy Duncan's cheerful presence never ceases to amaze me, and her quiet competence keeps me and *all* of us on track.

I managed to get back to Paul's list in December with my reflection on peace, but instead of moving on to joy, you may remember that I offered a piece on the technicality and the reality of membership in our little corner of God's garden of love. I could tell you that that information was so important that it took precedence over the other reflection, but the reality is that I still wasn't sure I was ready to talk about joy. Anyway, so much for my plan for this report, so rather than try to figure out some *other* clever theological way to organize this year's report, I decided to share some stories that have formed our life together this year.

Worship and Music



(Blow!) I was gone last year at the Feast of Pentecost, off helping my older son settle into his new digs in Reno, Nevada, but I hear that the service that day was extraordinary, thanks to our friend, Fr. Jim Wilkinson. Not only as St. Paul's treated to a multi-lingual reading of the story of the birth of the Church the day the fire of the Holy Spirit came upon those gathered in the name of Christ, but from what I hear, the sound of the shofar worked as well as the sound of a mighty rushing wind in stirring up the spirit of God's people. I heard it nearly stirred some of you into an untimely reunion with Peter, Paul, and Mary – and I don't mean the folk group.



Week by week we come to the Lord's table to receive the Body and Blood of Christ, supported and served by Evalyn Champion and the choir, our faithful Altar Guild and Acolytes, Iris, Todd, Carolyn and now Kim using your memorials and gifts to keep the Altar beautifully and appropriately decorated. Our average Sunday attendance for the year was 70, the same as in 2012, but down from 75 last year. We celebrated 47 weekday Eucharists in 2014, mostly our Wednesday noon service. We celebrated the Great Vigil of Easter, continued our special Maundy Thursday liturgy, enjoyed our outdoor Eucharist-and-'Q celebration with the Handy Fest, the St. Francis Blessing of the Pets, and our Parish Picnic, this year with a record crowd out at Audubon Park. We had much better weather for my annual ordination anniversary celebration of St. Nicholas Day, and a much better turn-out. Sixteen children enjoyed not only the Eucharist and the candy-filled shoes, but supper and gingerbread decoration as well, organized by Raiko Henderson.

Christian Formation



I have still not been told the reason for Trae Purdy's selection as one of three youth representing the Diocese of Kentucky at the triennial national Episcopal Youth Event last summer in Philadelphia. It might have been that Kendall Badgett, the Diocesan Youth coordinator needed a high school freshman to go with two upper classmen, or that she was trying to balance to young women with a young man or

provide some geographic balance within the Diocese. It might have been some sort of recognition that St. Paul's continues to be well represented at Diocesan youth events. But I think it most likely that Trae is as... *energetic* about his participation in those functions as he is around here. In any case, he represented the Diocese and St. Paul's well in worship and in learning and in service. And he represented us well in the fun of the Event as well. Trae tells the story of the afternoon the group spent on the famous steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, site of the "Gonna Fly Now" scene from the movie *Rocky*. But while Rocky Balboa ran up the steps only *once*, fueled by the sugar of more than enough chocolate, and way too much Coke, our young champion ran up and down those stairs until he thought one more time might make him loose it all.



Monessa Curry continues to work with Michelle Green to head up a crew of volunteers that are feeding the minds and hearts of our youngest members. They were wonderfully on display just the week before last with the Epiphany pageant, but the real learning takes place every week when they leave here and go the Atrium for their Godly Play lessons.

Meanwhile, Leslie Newman is coordinating, though hardly ever controlling our youth activities. Relationship building continues to be at the heart of our youth program, just as it is for the rest of us. From laser tag, to the Deeps' pool, to Holiday World, to Tri-Fest, we try to make sure that our middle- and high-school age young people have as much fun in each other's company and in the company of the church as we can manage. Along the way, the kids and Leslie and the other adults who spend time with them, eat a lot of pizza and a lot of chicken wings and a fair amount of tacos. And along the way, friendships are built and subtle but profound growth occurs.

St. Paul's had eight kids attend summer programs at All Saints camp this year, and three of our kids got to be part of the CIT, counselor in training program that accepted only eight young people from the whole Diocese. And once again this year, six of them attended Fall Gathering at All Saints, more than any other church in the Diocese. I am told that other churches are trying to figure out how they can duplicate the success of our program that, because of the generosity of the late Margaret Stanley, St. Ann's Guild and many of you, makes sure our kids can be part of these programs without thinking about the cost.

After concern was raised about whether we were taking as much care as we should for the safety of our children and youth, we have redoubled our efforts to conform to, and perhaps even take the lead in the Church's Safeguarding God's Children programs. I am committed to making sure that we not only project the right image, but that our youth and children are in *fact* protected and loved by their church family.

We have tried to offer a varied program of education for the adults of the Parish as well, including Wednesday evening programs that included Bible study, prayer, end-times, and a couple of refreshers on the Episcopal Church. Our Saints, Sinners and Cynics group continues to learn a little something around the round table at Rookies every Tuesday, and our considerably more intensive Education for Ministry program now includes a participant from St. Mary's, Madisonville and a satellite group at Trinity, Owensboro.

Parish Life

Last January, upon her return from one of her hospital stays, I visited our friend Betty Gillmore once again in her home. The sofa had been removed from the living room to make room for the hospital

bed in which she lay. I chatted a bit with Billy and a bit more with Susie (y'all know what I mean), and then asked Betty how she was doing. She responded that "this place" was nice enough, better than the hospital, to which I responded that she was home. She looked frail and tiny in that big bed, but the same old fire twinkled in her eyes as she scanned the room around her. The living room of the home she shared with Billy for decades looked familiar from my last visit, but as she turned her attention to the bed around her, she looked up at me with an indulgent smile that told me she didn't believe even a fellow dressed like me. By then, the confusion that overshadowed her last months was already very much present, but it was as if she was saying, "Oh, you dear mistaken fellow, there's no hospital bed in *my* home!"



It is truly amazing how well we take care of each other at St. Paul's, and it's amazing how much more we eat than bread and wine. We strengthen our ties together with Sunday morning breakfasts, coffee hours, Wednesday night suppers, St. Ann's luncheons, and even a six-foot ice cream sundae. We are pretty good at taking advantage of the old adage that many hands make light work.

We look after each other in other ways as well. Most of our octogenarians get around better than I do, and Brod, our sole nonagenarian, is here nearly every time we unlock the doors. But when things take a wrong turn, we are very good at taking care of each other, and our Senior Warden even helped us use the latest technology to make sure we got help (or at least food) to where it was needed. Y'all do a pretty good job, as well, making sure your church, *and* your priest are made aware when anyone in our family is in need of our help. Remember that I'd much rather hear about a problem ten times than not hear about it at all.

We have been working harder to increase communications within the Parish, *and* to welcome visitors and new members into our family.

Building and Grounds



Last spring we had to take down a couple of our old maple trees. On an inspection tour of our grounds a year earlier, Jeff Porter, now of blessed memory, had told us they needed to come down. But, though I don't think anyone worried too much about the tree in the playground that threatened the big window above the Altar, a good many people, including yours truly, were concerned about removing the much bigger tree that had stood watch over the courtyard for probably 100 to 120 years. When the arborist had removed most of the tree, he came in and invited me out to look at the bottom eight feet of massive trunk. Though most of the experts that had examined the tree thought that it would be damaged or even hollow at that level, it turned out to be solid and our contractor wanted to know if we wanted him to leave it. I had told him we wanted to keep a section of the felled trunk for some future project, and he said, "That way you can have an artist make a statue or something right here. I thought that might be

something to consider, so I passed the idea around a bit until someone, I think it may have been Kurt, pointed out a flaw in the plan. “What if the roots get going again?” this wiser voice asked, “How would it look to have new branches sprouting from Jesus’s arms, or even better, out the top of his head?”



I hope every one of you realizes just how blessed we are to have the beautiful building and grounds that we have. We are custodians of a treasure set aside for us over a century and a half ago. At the very beginning of last year we celebrated the completion of the collection phase of our Giving Our Past a Future capital campaign, and through the year a wonderfully active committee put more of your generous gifts to work preserving, restoring and improving our treasure. We continued to make progress with this Hall. We painted much of the common area of the Christian Ed wing and the contract has been let to expand that work. And then there’s the roof. When I got here three years ago, the estimate to reroof the church *alone* was in excess of \$250,000. I am pleased to report that, because of their diligence, study, and hard work we were able to roof the entire compound, and with 50-year metal shingles no less, for less than half that. We’re not finished, of course. At their next meeting, the Vestry will consider bids to update the plumbing in our bathrooms, we are accepting bids to repair our gutters, and we will carry forward our goal for comprehensive plans for storage, for our grounds, and for ongoing routine maintenance. Others have given us this treasure, now it is up to us to hand it on to our children, and *their* children, and *their* children, as the treasure that always has been.

Outreach

One of the simplest, most basic St. Paul’s outreach projects is St. Ann’s annual Christmas party for the residents at Henderson Manor, and this year’s party was no exception. The residents of the Manor live with a wide variety of physical, mental and developmental disabilities, but they seem to share a delight for punch, cheese curls, Christmas cookies, and, with Evalyn’s exuberant leadership, singing Christmas carols. Perhaps the biggest highlight, however, comes at the end of the festivities, with the giving of gifts. Each resident is presented with a hand-knitted cap or scarf and a medicine bottle carefully filled by the Guild the week before \$5 in quarters, enough to buy the freedom of snacks at the nearby convenience store. As things were winding down this year, one older black man sidled up to those of us that were packing things away, shifting from foot to foot, smiling, but not quite looking anyone in the eye. We asked if he enjoyed his snacks, and he smiled even more broadly and glanced up for just a second. We asked him if he liked his scarf and he gently stroked the soft, blue knit draped over his shoulder. Still, though almost everyone else had left the dining room to go about their other activities, he made no move to leave. Finally, from behind him, the staff member who was distributing the medicine bottles called the gentleman’s name, “You didn’t get your quarters, yet.” He turned to accept the gift, then glanced once more at us and smiled as he went his way. He might have just needed to get his gift, but I’d like to think what he wanted most was to say, “Thank you.”



To most of us, the most visible way that we reach out to love our neighbor is through Christian Community Outreach, an organization that ministers directly and *very* tangibly to the poor and needy in our community. Kathy Powell continues to serve on the Board, but Barbara Butler has had to step down from a seat she held on the Executive Board for many years. Through St. Paul's Discretionary Fund, we continue to provide the single largest portion of CCO's monthly income, and through support through the year, we have also helped fill CCO's pantry shelves.

Our second signature outreach project also continues to go strong. Begun as a way to support the patients and families of St. Anthony Hospice, the Prayer Shawl Ministry run by Rita Denton, continues to reach far beyond just Hospice, the cadre of knitters and crocheters producing shawls, scarves, and hats to bring hope and comfort *and* prayer to people who very much need to *feel* the love of Christ.

By our gifts and by our personal presence, St. Paul's is involved in ministry *throughout* the community. St. Paul's had a table at Runway Red for Matthew 25 AIDS ministry, sponsorship in the Sandy Lee Songwriters' Festival for Riverbend Arts Academy, a team at Rotary's Trivia Night fundraiser, of course the Christmas Party at Henderson Manor, we packed over fifty boxes for Seamen's Church Institute Christmas on the River, and even the Pancake Breakfast with Santa for Riverside School.

Partnership and Involvement



Those of you that were here for the Annual Meeting last year will remember that the Bishop was with us. In going on twenty years of ordained ministry, that was the first time I had known that to happen, but it turned out to be a really positive thing for our Parish. Bishop Terry and Canon Amy seemed to have a good time during their visit, but I didn't know how much until the Bishop's address to Diocesan Convention in November. When he said, as part of his closing, that he had enjoyed being part of the Annual Meeting at St. Paul's, Henderson, a scoffing laugh went up from the assembled clergy and lay leaders. "No, really," he grinned, "I *do* enjoy annual meetings, now that I don't have to *run* them." I'm glad His Grace got to be with us to hear all the wonderful things going on at St. Paul's, and I wish we could have worked it out for him to be here again this year. From reading Vestry minutes and from hearing comments from many of you, there was a time when our relationship with the Diocese of Kentucky was shaky at best. But from the Bishop's mention of St. Paul's in his annual address, I'd say that at least the Bishop is sure that has changed.



Because we can't do everything ourselves, we try to be a good *partner* in ministry. One of my favorite areas where this happens is in our long partnership with the Presbyterians, Community Baptist, and First Christian in providing a fun and thoughtful Vacation Bible School experience. The circle is drawn a little wider for our partnership in the Lenten Luncheon series. I'm responsible for the liturgy part of our offering for this annual community event, but the real attraction, but the *real* work is done by St. Ann's Guild who every year manage to serve a beautiful luncheon to an *overflow* crowd. We also host the community for our Shrove Tuesday pancake supper, events for the Daughters of the American Revolution and the Garden Club of Henderson, and we are well known for our participation in the community wide Memorial Day and Veterans' Day programs. And then there's Miss Ella's single handed campaign to get as many of us into the Handy Fest RC wagon as she can, and Ella and Marcia's yard sale that invites well over a hundred people into our doors every year and raised over \$4,000 this year to be used for a facelift for our Prayer Books and Hymnals.

Our partnerships go on well beyond our community, though, through the Diocese of Kentucky and the larger Episcopal Church. Not only do I take my role in the governance of the Church seriously, but our own Leslie Newman has been recently re-elected to represent the Diocese of Kentucky as a Trustee of the University of the South, and John Henderson was elected a Trustee of the Diocese's Dudley Trust. What's more, our friend Larry Courtney continues his march toward a vocation as a Deacon of the Church. I am happy to report that he is doing very well in his discernment internship at Trinity Church, Owensboro, and am even happier to report that he is now more than halfway through the six month program and barely more than two months away from being back with us for the last year of his preparation for ordination.

Last year we supported the Diocese of Kentucky with \$25,000. At 13% of the previous year's operating income, that still did not meet the canonical level of 15%, and the Vestry's pledge of \$27,886 for the coming year doesn't either. But at 14%, we're *almost* there.

Budget and Stewardship

Okay, so it's hard to think of a story about our finances. I suppose I could talk about our bookkeeper, Donna Mulcahy, who's on contract, not on staff, but is more family than anything else. Or I could remind you of Kent Preston's campaign for All Saints Camp and Conference Center that raised \$8,400, over half the goal set by All Saints' Board for the whole Diocese. Or I could tell you about a newcomer to our Parish who, on his first visit, totally flummoxed two Vestry members *and* the Rector by asking for a pledge card. But if we're going to talk about money, maybe it's best to just get to the numbers.

We managed to bring expenses in under budget for 2014, but unfortunately, our operating income was even *further* under budget. We received 96% of pledged income in 2014 and your current year gifts, our so-called plate and pledge income accounted for 88% of our total operating income of \$210,606. The bigger deficit is that our investment accounts did not produce near as much income as we budgeted. We ended the year essentially drawing nearly \$15,000 from our generous reserve, and that is without using as much as we had hoped for non-operational outreach efforts. Of course, that kind of deficit is no more sustainable than depending on investment income for present expenses in the first place. Between the Endowment Fund, the Bagley, Rankin, Marrs and Agency Trusts, the value of St. Paul's investment funds

at year's end was just over \$1.9 million, but with a couple of full budget cycles behind us, the 2015 Budget considerably reduces the amount we expect to draw from those resources, both in terms of the percent of our operating budget and in terms of actual dollars expected.

To offset that reduction, the Vestry set a goal for September's Operating Fund campaign of \$188,000 in pledges, up only 7% from last year's \$175,000. We have done well, but there are still some who customarily pledge that we didn't hear from this fall, so we haven't yet met our goal. Nevertheless, we are moving forward with a very modest, 1% overall increase on the *expense* side of the Budget, allowing us to make the increase in Diocesan giving I talked about a moment ago, to offer a small cost of living increase to Judy and Monessa, and to *fund* the addition of help in the nursery, though we still have work to do to hire such help.

In accordance with the Canons of the Diocese, last fall an internal committee led by Vestry Member Hugh Hennessey conducted an audit of the Parish's accounts and procedures, including the Discretionary Fund and the Capital Fund. The audit acknowledged an incorrect accounting of funds from the days when St. Paul's was balancing property issues, an error highlighted by our bookkeeper Donna Mulcahy which did not effecting the flow of actual funds. The audit found that our financial status is accurately reflected in the reports reviewed and received by the Vestry. Under a new program, we have requested a team from the finance department of the Diocese of Kentucky to do the audit of St. Paul's 2014 records.

Conclusion



From the stories I hear every day, and from the events and accomplishments and programs that I have tried to outline here, St. Paul's had a very good year. But it was still a tough one for me. I learned some things about life, and I learned some things about *myself*, some of which I wasn't sure I *wanted* to learn, at least not in the *way* I learned them. I found out (*again*) that I am neither immortal *nor* invincible, and I found out that I am not always able to help everyone as much as I *want* to be able to. As much as I wish it weren't so, I have limits. Some of those limits are just a matter of time, energy, and even competency. As one friend said during a particularly challenging time, "The cape is off, Mister!" Other limits are a matter of living faithfully within the systems that I have taken vows to obey and defend.

I never finished my reflection on the Fruit of the Spirit, because for a while there, I thought that I had somehow *lost* joy. But it turns out that it was here all along. Joy was right here in the eyes of an old friend from her last bed, and in the bright smile of a young friend who has more to give than he even knows what to do with. Joy was here in this town that has become part of who I am, in the fabric and life of the Parish that I have pledged to serve, and in the larger councils of Christ's Bride. Joy was here in reaching out to those who need what we have more than enough to give, and in pageants, parades and programs of our life together. Joy was most certainly here all along in the blessed rhythms of worship and prayer and praise. Joy, it seems, is *persistent* – if you remember where to look. And I finally remembered to look... at *you*. Because I *love* being a Christian. I love being a *priest*. And with all my self: body, soul, and spirit, I love being *your* priest.

Thank you for loving me through this tough year. And thank you, thank you, thank you for letting me love *you*.